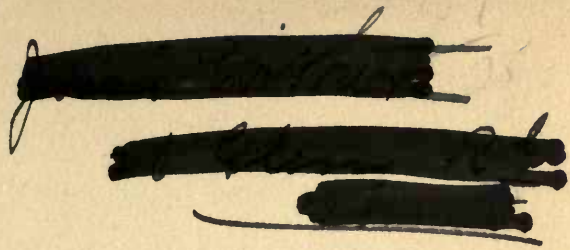
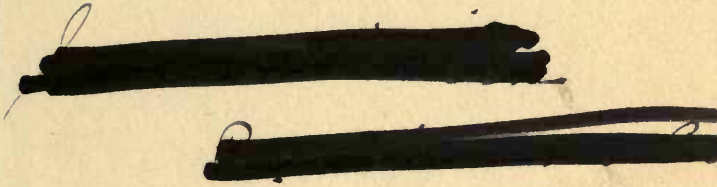
THREE GIRLS AND A HERMIT

by

DOROTHEA CONYERS





THREE GIRLS AND A HERMIT

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THREE GIRLS AND A HERMIT

By
DOROTHEA CONYERS
Author of "The Strayings of Sandy"
"The Boy, some Horses, and the Girl"
etc

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THREE GIRLS AND A HERMIT

CHAPTER I

HOW THE TRIP WAS TALKED OF

"LIFE!" Moira Considine used the word with dramatic emphasis. "I want to see life." She spelt the word mentally with a leaded capital, waving tanned, well-shaped hands at the rugged Kerry landscape, as if to point out that it was a mere rusty side-track on the world's great railway. Mountains, dimly purple in summer's haze, framed the picture, seen rising in majesty high above the rough peaks. Cones of smaller hills, crouching, humble subjects, at the monarch's heels. A lake, the sky's clear blue tinting it, rippled to shore through a belt of rushes, little wavelets, where the rushes ceased, mouthing at a pebbly shore. A fuchsia hedge, tangle of scarlet and green, edged the little garden, the lower bells dropping on the water. The west wind, blowing gently, brought with it clean scents of heather and peat, and a kiss of salt on its breath. Brooding over all was a peace such as only Ireland knows.

But the three Miss Considines, in the folly of their youth, looked at none of these things. Familiarity had bred a bitter contempt of the lonely beauty. Towering hill-crests, boom of distant waves, lap of

waters, scent of salt and heather, had been their daily portion since, sixteen years before, they had arrived at Borrisdeane, three lonely, blackly clad children, and remained there ever since. Their father, an improvident failure, had sent his children to his sister, promised with airy carelessness to pay her, and then died himself, penniless. Miss Maria Considine, now dead, had been of a soured disposition ; she accepted her burden without a murmur, but Borrisdeane, sufficing her outlook, must suffice her nieces, and she kept them there without interval of trip or change. They recalled this now, forgetting their many hours of happiness : the joys of fishing in the hill-locked lake, of rushing noisily to the sea and wading deep in the tumbling waters, of coming in hungry and dripping, to feast on hot griddle-bread and eggs and honey. Borrisdeane in the last few years had grown to be looked on in the light of a prison ; Lake Cottage, their little home, as a dungeon cell. With youth's careless ingratitude, they had taken their life as a matter of course ; never seen or cared, save with a laugh at stinginess, how Aunt Maria's black dresses grew rustier year by year, how much she denied herself to clothe them in warm jerseys and blue serges, how many times her head ached when she dragged herself to the daily lessons they rebelled at, how her daily glass of claret vanished that they might have the honey they loved. For Aunt Maria, being one of the many who confuse religion with intolerance, and holiness with perpetual gloom, had never sought for their love. Without a murmur she had accepted their ingratitude ; never breathed through these years that they were dependent on her charity,

and then passed suddenly and quietly, before she had fully arranged her will with the stiff precision she had meant to. Sudden heart failure had taken her from them one still spring night, and the girls, left in complete freedom, brewed mischief long ere her grave was green. They had duly driven to distant Tramee, there to lay in a stock of mourning garments and shroud their faces in veils, which to a thoughtful mind suggested eclipses, but they found it hard to put on sorrow, and after a short time left off trying. It was later, when the sorrows of change unstrapped Biddy's tongue, that they saw, and even then dimly, all their aunt had done for them.

Biddy, the old-shawled, check-aproned servant, adored them too deeply to say anything now. She had slaved for them without grudging, and kept house now with a stern refusal to try the strange new dishes which Moira would have had. Biddy held her trio in check when they would have worked havoc in the kitchen ; but their hearts yearned for change. Sitting in the garden or gathered round the peat fire in the chilly evenings, their tongues clacked noisily as they whipped themselves on to a deed which savoured, none too faintly, of folly. If they could live alone here, why not elsewhere? Mrs. Desmond, the clergyman's wife, on being consulted, had nervously murmured there could not be much difference.

They were talking of it now, and Biddy baking bread for tea, listened with growing uneasiness.

Moira, the second girl, paced up and down the little garden talking loudly, while Eva and little quiet Kathleen hung upon her words.

From earliest childhood she had led and they had followed. Hot-tempered, self-willed, possessed of an over-ready tongue, Moira had swayed their pliant natures to her will, until she scarcely knew what it was to be thwarted. No one but the Hermit ever questioned her decisions, or forced her to a path she did not want to tread on.

It was Moira who had taken them bathing with all their clothes on, so that they might practise the saving of life in a common-sense way, and having swum out of her depth was unable to get in, and would have been drowned if the Hermit had not come for her; Moira, who stole a boat in half a gale of wind and fortunately capsized her a few yards from the shore; Moira, whose ever-active brain was for ever evolving impossible hopes and ideas, and who now was determined to leave Borrisdeane, and lead her sisters to fortune. She waved a pink-covered weekly, lent by the doctor's wife. "Having sufficient bread and butter and eggs, and being covered by black serge, is not being alive," she said vehemently. Here she stepped off the path and crushed a precious begonia, one of a dozen bought by Kathleen from the proceeds of her bantams. Kathleen's wail of dismay rent the air.

"We can all ride." Moira moved hastily. "Oh, Kathleen, what is a begonia when it's a question of one's life?"

Kathleen, remarking that the begonia had no further interest in that subject, tenderly lifted the trodden, pulpy stem with its bundle of striped leaf and flaring blossom, and gave heated information as to its high cost of sixpence.

Moira, keeping carefully in the middle of the path, denounced her sister as small-minded, and went on with her subject.

"The money—the spare money—is ours to do what we like with," she said. "Let us do as I have suggested. Take it, buy some young horses, and hunt them in some other place; go to balls and parties and wear evening dresses, and live as other girls do. Oh! think of it; it's our only chance of"—Moira had the grace to blush—"of marrying." Eva suddenly drooped her pretty, fair head.

"What is to happen to us here?" demanded Moira. "Just to drift from year to year until we take to bonnets and beaded mantles and to feeling the chickens' breasts to see if they are fat enough to kill, as old Miss O'Brien does."

This tragic flight of fancy carried weight. There was silence, broken only by the gentle lapping of the lake, in the little garden. Eva, the eldest girl, frowned indecisively, looked at one of Biddy's chickens roosting outside, and sighed.

She and Kathleen were fair-skinned and fair-haired, one tall, and the other slight and very short, with gentle, reserved voices and quiet blue eyes. Moira was auburn-haired, grey-eyed, of restless energy, with a red mouth which curled into hidden smiles or drooped to deepest dejection in almost childish transparency. She wearied of Borrisdeane. Her mind, fed by weekly periodicals, aspired to going forth clad in some of the wondrous garments she read of in *Society Scannings* and other journals treating of the great world. Also, she wanted even more than this to hunt. With a sweeping belief that everything

must be as she wanted it, Moira Considine felt certain that the rest of the world would be a spirited combination of lawn meets and church parades, chiffon frocks and young men.

"It's not—it's not as if it would cost money," Moira spoke breathlessly. "But we can really live for nothing. I was at the forge yesterday, and Martin Hallinan told me one could make fortunes of selling young horses. His aunt's second cousin sold one for thirty pounds to a dealer, and saw him two years after in the ring at the Dublin Horse Show, and they were asking"—Moira's voice dropped to awed tones—"eighty pounds."

Here Kathleen, who regretted her flowers, was unkind enough to inquire whether the dealer or the horse had been on sale in Dublin, and quailed before her sister's withering glance.

"Some people," said Moira icily, "seem to be devoid of understanding; and there is Martin Hallinan. Ask him if it's true."

Martin Hallinan, a burly red-bearded giant, paused to wish them a shy "good evening." As Moira's breathless interrogations were hurled upon him he removed his hat and scratched his head with deliberation.

"Sorra a lie in it," he said stoutly, "an' it's a matter well known that there's money in the horses. I saw the horse meself many times drawing turf from the deep bog. A big camel of a baste he was, but Mullady bought him and gave up to thirty pound. And when me aunt's second cousin, that went groom to Captain Casey, was up in Dublin, didn't he see the grey, fat and shinin', and he ambling round the ring as if he nivir saw turf?

"'Hi! grey horse,' says me aunt's cousin, says he ('that's,' says he, 'the way to speak to thim). Did you get a prize?' says he, the sight nearly to leave his eyes looking at the grey and the way he was changed.

"'I did not,' says the man that was riding. 'I did not. Don't ye know,' says he, sour-like, 'that the besht horses gets no prizes, but thim with dandy legs and heads, steppin' like common roadsthers, or thim,' says he, dark like, 'that has frinds in court.' Mike, that's me aunt's cousin, said nothin', havin' got two prizes himself. 'An' what,' says he, 'would you be asking for that grey horse?' and he ran his eye down the hindmosht leg, where he knew he'd see the bump that the grey got kicking the cart to bits one day he was too lightsome.

"'That's no curb, but a knock he got av win in Kildare,' says the man on the grey, sharp-like, 'an' I'm asking a hundred,' says he, 'just to make a quick sale.'

"'God Almighty sind you it,' says Mike, says he; an' shure if that's not making money, miss, what is?"

"You see," cried Moira eagerly to her listening sisters.

"Asking," said a gentle voice, "is not always receiving."

Unheard oars had come sweeping across the lake and a boat been moored to the rough stones which did duty for a pier.

"Oh! you," cried Moira; "you always scoff."

"But it's true," said the newcomer simply.

Martin Hallinan scratched the other side of his head and induced a new vein of thought.

"Begob," he said, "an' it is. Didn't I ask twinty pound for eight months for a cob I had? Divil a ha'porth wrong with him but a stiffness in his foremost legs; that was more play actin' than anythin' else, for a belt of a stick'd make him sound. An' didn't I take three pound fifteen for him in the tail of the string?" he concluded dolefully. "But there's money in the horses all the time," he added, catching Moira's fiery eye. "Many a one here under a cyar that ye'd sell aisy." Here he said good evening, and walked on.

The girls, thought upon their faces, watched him go down the narrow fuchsia-bordered road.

"And you, Hermit, have some tea," said Eva hospitably.

Old Biddy was bringing out a table, laying a worn white cloth.

The newcomer was a man with a quiet face, tired blue eyes, and a sad mouth. To the rest of the world he was Oliver Tremayne; to the Considine girls he was the Hermit. He had taken Borrisdeane House, a great rambling place just across the lake, and lived there alone, never going away, shooting in winter, fishing in summer, riding at all times. At first he had declined all society; but Moira, when a romping, long-legged child, had made her way beyond his gates and into his life. He had taught her how to fish, taken her for rapturous days out upon the lake, when with thumping heart one watched the fly drop on the water, and with a shout of ecstasy felt the rod's point bend, heard the reel's harsh whirr of triumph, and played a big lake trout; for other days, upon the heaving sea, with long lines coming dripping aboard. He had walked with her through his tangled

overgrown woods, teaching her the lore of bird and beast.

Now that Moira had grown up they quarrelled; his gentle voice cut across her extravagant dreams; his quiet contradictions were generally right, and Moira, the woman, scoffed and wrangled with her childhood's friend.

He came with an easy slouch, which was something apart from the hasty stride of the Borrisdeane youths, pushing his way through a gap in the hedge, where blackberries, purple and green, hung about the crimson fuchsias. A sparkle of humour, which no sadness could subdue, lay behind eyes and mouth. He stopped still, as Moira, fresh eyed and sunny haired, turned to greet him. With some asperity she asked him what he looked at.

"The sunshine, Moira," he said quietly.

"It's behind you," said Moira sharply, pointing to the glowing west.

"Sometimes I hope that there is still some in front of me," he said, and sat down, still looking at her.

Biddy, helped by the elder girls, had laid their tea—smoking griddle-bread, pats of golden butter, a square of honey, and a nest of fresh-laid eggs; for the Miss Considines, being economical, would take nothing more except milk and biscuits before bedtime.

They knew him too well to cease their discussion; it rattled on over steaming strong tea and hot buttered cakes, and the Hermit, his face very thoughtful, listened to their wondrous plans.

"But have you no people?" he said; "friends of your father's, whom you could visit?"

"Aunt Jane has written to us." Eva took a letter from her pocket.

"Aunt Jane, who never even sent us a Christmas card, is troubled for our immortal souls. The unmarried Considines are over-worried by religion." Moira tweaked the letter from Eva's fingers, and spread the thin, black-edged sheets upon her knee. "Aunt Jane says that unless we exist upon potatoes and bread we cannot possibly live upon our income here; but that she, being our late father's sister, will interest herself to provide us with some suitable employments. Our lack of education and accomplishments is, of course, a great drawback. But one might qualify as a lady nurse to little children—it is a nice womanly employment; and then for another—if we know anything—she thinks Mrs. Halford, the rector's wife, would receive the eldest as nursery governess to their little girls. No salary, but laundry and a liberal table. Three young women could not live alone in the wilds of Kerry, especially in such dire poverty. So much for our relations, who would have me call the butlers 'Mister,'" laughed Moira. "Shall we ask Aunt Jane to stay, and show her how chickens and ducks and boiled eggs are permissible upon our income if we stayed here? But we must try our fortune. We'll not stay." She sharply asked Eva what she was thinking of.

"It was only if we did not sell the horses you are going to buy; if we came back failures," said thoughtful Eva.

"Yes, if they were not sold," said the Hermit. He had removed Aunt Jane's letter from the table and torn it wrathfully to little pieces, his blue eyes growing hard.

Moira declared volubly that it was as easy as easy to sell. You bought horses in the rough, you trained and rode and showed them off, and then sold for fabulous profits. Why, people lived by it. She splashed hot water into the teapot with a vigour which induced the Hermit to remove his legs from danger, and old Biddy to cry, "Have a care, Miss Moira, astore," from the kitchen window. "I have a fresh kittle on the boil if ye want more," she added, thrusting her wrinkled old face into the sunshine. "An' Miss Eva's March-hatched Howdang is afther laying an egg."

Moira took the teapot in, and the others were silent, thinking. Aunt Maria, quietly generous in death as in life, had left them all she had. An income of two hundred pounds a year to be shared equally, and savings, gathered before the hungry baby mouths came to be filled, amounting to eight hundred pounds. Now what they thought of doing was leaving the cottage, using this loose capital, and going to some hunting country for the winter, some spot where they could ride hard, live in a pictured whirl of gaiety, and pay for all this fun by selling their horses at the end of the season for enormous sums. Had not Martin Hallinan given an instance of one animal bought but ten miles away, which had found its way to the great Dublin Horse Show? There were other colts drawing turf from the deep bog; there were long-tailed youngsters. But it was a momentous question, for eight hundred pounds, once spent, was not to be recalled. Eva, the eldest, hesitated.

Moira returned with fresh tea, with fresher arguments and ideas. She wove a tinselled, flimsy web of hope and folly, until Eva and Kathleen went away—

one to work in the tiny gardens which supplied them with fruit and vegetables, the other to help Biddy in the kitchen, from which, as the old woman came near the window, heated words could be heard.

"Childer's talk and nonsense, Miss Eva, an' me chickens all to be left behind, an' the garding idle. Oh! I tell ye——" the next was lost in a clatter of pots and pans.

So far Oliver Tremayne had said nothing. He was, in fact, amazed and shocked at this new idea, suddenly sprung upon him.

"Well?" Moira was more uneasy at his silence than she would have cared to own to. "And you. What do you think of it?"

"It sounds—pretty," he said, laying down his cup, and looking straight into her starry, hopeful eyes.

"We should be away for months; see people; be in the world. It would give us a chance."

"Of what?" he asked quietly, looking at her level brows and wilful mouth.

"Of marrying," said Moira boldly. She was not shy with him. "Suppose we remain and exist here. Who can we meet? We do not want to grow into old maids of Lee. And there are no men here."

"No, of course not," he said, a twinkle growing in his eyes.

"But I suppose you never thought of that?" said Moira sharply.

"Of your marrying? Strange to say, I have," he answered; the twinkle had died now, his eyes were very tired again. "Yet men do come here. They come to fish. There was Carstairs last year."

"Who has never written to Eva since then. And she has felt it bitterly."

"Carstairs will come back," he answered. "Also there are men in your great world who might not write either. In his case there is, I feel sure, an excuse."

"And then his idea was to take Catermere and live here, in these wilds, for the summer," burst out Moira, in swift contempt.

"Surely one might do worse," he said wistfully. He looked, waving his hand, at the swell of the purple hills, golden lights astray upon their sides; at the stretch of bog, yellow-grassed and deep-pooled; at the ripple of waters seen through the scarlet-dappled hedge. The sea's kiss came on the wooing wind; the hum of the Atlantic, beating on a pebbly beach, could be plainly heard: Ireland—a mysterious, capricious woman, showing all her lonely loveliness. "One might do worse," he said again, his blue eyes clouding—"much worse. You've loved it yourself, Moira, in the summers when you fished with me. Moira, if you knew. Eyes and ears, aye, and hearts, ache in the blaze and glare beyond those hills. Here a man may learn peace."

Moira sniffed in youthful contempt. Peace was for old men and hermits; life for young bodies and throbbing, hopeful hearts. She wanted to take it up in both hands, to bathe herself in the excitement she had never known, to dance and flirt and make merry. Yet, looking at the Hermit's face, misgiving touched her, so much so that she grew angry.

"And what do you think of it?" she questioned, as Eva and Kathleen came back. "Don't you think it's

all a splendid idea?" And her eyes flashed menace of warning and softness of entreaty. She wanted support. Eva placed some foolish reliance on the Hermit's opinion.

"Yes. What do you think of it now Moira has told you of her idea?" asked Eva slowly.

"To leave this place; to take out your capital; for you three, living alone, to attempt to buy and sell horses with some idea of making them pay?" Oliver Tremayne looked Moira straight in the face and showed himself no coward. "I think I never heard of such a piece of childish folly in my life," he said emphatically.

"God's blessing on ye for that same word," said Biddy, as she removed the tray.

The Hermit faced Moira's kindling cheeks and eyes, and, with an eloquence rare for him, talked on.

Horses, even those bought by experts, went wrong. Supposing this happened, they would only return at the end of a few wasted months, poorer and dissatisfied with everything. To come back at war with the world when they might remain, and in remaining, never know what fortune would knock at their doors.

He saw Eva's eyes light, and knew that she understood his meaning.

"Also, you spoke of riding"—here he was brutally candid—"but galloping about on the postman's pony and the smith's play-actin' cob is not quite the same thing as the hunting of impetuous young horses over a strange country. The world——"

"Has changed since your day," stormed Moira, now actively furious.

"It changes little," he said, with a sadness which

made Moira ashamed. "Certainly not enough to allow three pretty girls to live alone in it."

Moira declared hotly that three girls could live alone anywhere. She saw her sisters' faces, and realised that her house of cards quivered. With rapid tongue and sharpened voice she declared that she had read so in *The Ladies' Illustrated*, and could not see what the Hermit could know of society and hunting.

The Hermit, very gravely, said that perhaps he had read a man's *Illustrated*. Also, that he supposed they had really made up their minds.

Moira hoped they had, and that they would show him how wrong he was. But her voice trembled as she spoke.

"I hope," said the Hermit, "that you may." He got up slowly, with a troubled look on his face, for all this was new to him. Moira generally saw him to his boat. To-day he was allowed to go alone. He pulled away with a long, easy stroke, looking young and supple as he bent to his oars; the lulling cluck of the rowlocks, the gentle splash of the blades died away; the boat, black against the evening glow, slipped to the wooded shore opposite.

Moira had been too angry even to say good-bye, for her sisters were plainly impressed; but later, over milk and oatmeal biscuits, she had her way, and her sisters agreed to do as she wished.

CHAPTER II

TREATING CHIEFLY OF YOUNG HORSES

"I PRESUME," said the Hermit quietly, "that nothing will induce you to change your minds."

"Nothing," said Moira stoutly.

She had pulled the boat across the lake. Despite their quarrels, it seemed natural to come first to him with their plans: how Eva and Kathleen had consented, how the money had been lodged in the bank, and how Martin Hallinan and Jamesey Casey and Father Magee had pledged themselves to scour all Kerry, to send word across bog and up mountain. Horses worth being taken away should arrive to be bought. Hallinan had promised to "pass a note by posht to sundry cousins," for, oh surely there were great horses about!

Moira and the Hermit stood at a gate opening into Borrisdeane woods. Sunshine made the mossy ground a trellis-work of silver and green; the branches, arched and twisted, a canopy above their heads. Great beeches, straight firs, slender larch, coarse sturdy elm, lacing and twining, too free from axe and saw, and through every gap shone a glimmer of grey waters. Rabbits darted to and fro to their homes in the sandy bank. The air was full of the songs of little birds. At the far end of the

wood the trees were stunted, bent by the force of the gales in winter when they rushed over the rise beyond the lake. Then the Atlantic spoke in tones of thunder, lashing at the cliffs, rolling the pebbles up and down as it foamed, tempest driven, to the road's edge. To-day its voice was a distant, soft-voiced chant, lulling tired nerves to rest.

"Will you miss it sometimes, I wonder?" said the Hermit. He looked first at the wood, then at the girl by his side. "The sea calls one, Moira, when one has lived near it. Will you miss anything here?"

Moira made an extremely vulgar remark, which alluded to missing her grandmamma.

She was just longing to get away. To go to balls—she had never worn an evening gown. She slid a bare arm from her loose sleeve and considered dispassionately that it would do. "Go, get into the world, the wonderful, unknown world."

They were very pretty and young, these girls: it was not strange that they should want to go away. Yet Tremayne's eyes, now fixed again on the silver tumble of light and shade, were very thoughtful. The world could proffer a golden cup full of sparkling wine; here one must be content with cold still water.

"Money," he said, "does not go so very far in gay places. Dances, theatres, good grooms, and dear forage eat it up. Where have you decided on?"

Moira became voluble again. She perched upon the gate, swinging her slender, stoutly shod feet. She had read in many papers. She had thought and wondered, of course Eva and Kathleen also, but Moira's tone seemed to imply that their thoughts were of little account. "And she—that is, they—had

decided, had even written to a house agent and awaited his reply. There was hunting, there were soldiers, she had read in *Dublin Society* of balls and parties, so they were going to—a place called—Ballydare." Moira, her golden visions rising and dazzling her, drew a choked breath: she hardly knew what wonders she expected; the Hermit, turning aside, also choked with an appalling suddenness, spluttering sounds issued from beyond his shaking neck, and when Moira, rushing round, beheld his face, his eyes were full of water. "A fly, I think," he said weakly. "Do—don't look, Moira," and wheeling he choked anew.

Moira, making severe remarks as to the folly of using open mouths as fly traps, waited for his recovery. It came slowly.

"To—Ballydare—to see the world," he said at last. "So you settled on that, Moira. Oh there'll be dances there, of course, and hunting; but, faith, I thought you meant Melton at least, or, choosing Ireland, somewhere near Kildare."

Moira reft some newspaper cuttings from her pocket, and having requested the Hermit to choke no more, she read extracts in awed tones. "Lady Evelyn Balcoyle wore black satin and diamonds"—it was an account of a ball—"Lady Buller green chiffon, the Misses Reidy all in white, with different coloured sashes."

The Hermit heard it patiently, and choked no more, but checked with an effort some comments he seemed anxious to make.

"Go, see your world," he said at last. "There were one or two things I meant to say to you, Moira, but

they must wait now until you judge between Ballydare and Borrisdeane."

"As if any one could compare them," said Moira with scorn.

The Hermit thought politely that they could not, and suggested tea. As Moira swung from the gate she looked again at the wood, and the misgivings of yesterday tore at her heart, checking her fancy's gallop with a sudden curb of pain ; something, she could not tell what, which ruffled her to anger. Who could regret the woods, with all the world in front?

Borrisdeane House, long and rambling, stood clear cut in the sunshine. Ireland's artists were not given to beauty of outline, but they had spared Borrisdeane the square heaviness of its contemporaries, and built out straggling wings to either side. The house faced the lake, the lawn sloping to the water. Crimson gladioli flamed in the flower beds, mixed with a tangle of mignonette, for the Hermit loved its scent. A wide border was ablaze with August flowers ; the place was neither trim nor neglected.

The Hermit lived in one wing, using a bay-windowed wide room for his own. Here, among precious pieces of Sheraton, and out of quaintly flowered cups, they took tea. Moira often wondered why no other room had such colourings, such blending of Persian rugs and deep gleam of beeswaxed boards, such soft background for many coloured prints ; thought and despised a little, thinking loftily that men's should be like young Desmond's of the Rectory—a mixture of muddy boots, rods, guns, and discomfort.

A table was laid for tea. Old Lowestoft cups on a fine white cloth, glistening silver, a copper kettle and

plain brown teapot. There were photographs about among the books, sun-pictures which Moira had often studied, of girls in habits and ball dresses, and a few men's faces simpering in the set misery of being taken. "There is no doubt about it," said the Hermit, as he rang the bell and lighted the spirit lamp beneath the shining kettle, "that your aunt, with her tiny income, was a marvellous woman to have saved anything."

"But look how we lived," said Moira contemptuously.

A sudden steeliness hardened Oliver Tremayne's blue eyes; he spooned tea out of an inlaid caddy, and then turned, looking hard at Moira. "Can you ever remember being hungry?" he asked very quietly, "or cold, or badly dressed? Youth, after all, is very like a quicksand, sucking down all it touches."

The first twinge of the doubt which was eventually to be Aunt Maria's reward assailed Moira's mind. She had never thought of the necessity of being grateful. It had been natural to be fed and clothed and looked after, and they had never paused to consider that their aunt had kept them all. She was silent while the Hermit's man carried in bread and butter and hot cakes. James, a native of the village, was a sacrifice to civilisation, wearing sober black clothes, and padding on his toes, that he might go softly—an accomplishment which had been attained with great difficulty.

"We ought to be very grateful to Aunt Maria," shot out Moira, angry with herself. "For now, through her, we can get away from this hole"—she waved her hand towards the tangle of boughs and sheen of

rippling waters—"where there is no one to know, and where nothing ever happens."

James's manner as he laid down the cakes was fraught with importance. He too pointed outwards. "There's a strange mothor afther going up the road, and Mikey Maher's ass is in the ditch," he said pleasantly.

"Now, who shall say," said the Hermit, "that nothing happens at Borrisdeane?"

"I was below, an' begob she to make off like a sthreak of fire," went on James. "I think, sir, Maher's mother's like to be dead. We can hear the schreeches of her up here. For she rowled over, an' the ass, bein' young and confused like, bit her . . . in the leg. I'll get the crame, sir." He went out noiselessly, as a well-trained servant should.

Long wails, rendered thin by distance, wafted from the road below the wood.

James, very much excited, reappeared with a jug of cream. "There's the divil's own danger in mothors," he told his master. "But lasht Thursday six weeks one druv over a duck by Guinane's public. I declare to God ye'd be afther one ov thim birds with a horse-trap for a year an' ye couldn't manage that same. Bit the head off as clane as a fox would—so it did. If you don't want me, sir, I'll go down to help Katey Maher up"; he went rapidly, skimming across the flower beds in his decorous black clothes.

"If I were to pay a thousand a year in the world, I could not find a James," said the Hermit, laughing unrestrainedly. "He walks like a cat and looks like a butler, but he is James Magee behind it all. He's bringing the woman back."

Mrs. Maher, limping and calling down curses on all motors, was being assisted to the kitchen. The donkey, very dusty and dejected, was led behind.

The Hermit went out to ask for particulars, and to reproach the donkey.

Mike Maher refuted the reproach with indignation, "the poor innicent animal that didn't know what he was doin'. Into the ditch her ran with the dinth of terror, and me mamma, makin' half a kind of lep, rowled out undther his head. Sure, may be he thought 'twas the mothor cyar that he herd whin he got her undther his lip, an' where—he had to catch her—I tell yer honour—she'll not rest——"

The Hermit retreated hastily. From what he gathered, it would be some days before Mike Maher's mother would sit with ease.

Moira had left her tea and risen to wander round the room. An old desk stood open on the table; a shabby walnut thing such as schoolboys use, and on the frayed velvet lay a girl's photograph. Moira stopped to stare. The draped skirts and frizzy fringe were the fashions of twenty years before: the girl herself was splendidly handsome, cold featured, with rounded naked arms. She seemed to stare out haughtily, almost repellent, in the full knowledge of her beauty, looking where the photographer had asked her to, as if disdaining his efforts to do her justice. On the right-hand corner was a blackly written V. "What a lovely face!" Moira picked the photograph up; the Hermit, turning, caught his breath sharply. "Who is it?"

"An old love. A dead friend, Moira—long lost." He came across and took it from her hands, and stood

holding it. "You have no past, Moira, to rise up and mock you. But if ever you have"—he smiled suddenly—"may it be in your power to wipe it out as I do." He went to the fire, dropping the picture on to the glowing turf. "I got it out to burn it," he said.

Moira stared. This was a new side of the Hermit's character. She watched the photograph as it crinkled and burnt up slowly, scorched to death by the dull red fire.

"A dead friend?" she asked.

"Dead, Moira": he smiled at her a little sadly. "Dead, and I live, and hope to live—more. If you had not been going away so soon we might have talked more of it." Mrs. Maher's wails arose from the kitchen. "Listen," he said, "what people they are! I came among them fifteen years ago, sick of everything on earth, and they have healed me. I can laugh now. I can even wonder why I could not laugh then." He stamped upon the turf fire, and flung some wood upon it.

"If you were to go away, then," said Moira, "you would miss it all."

"Some of it. For something else now means the world to me," he answered quietly.

He rowed Moira over the lake in the hush of a golden twilight, and said he would come soon to see the prospective hunters.

The "word" concerning horses seemed to have travelled far and wide. Borrisdeane became an active volcano, flinging up horses hotly.

"There's a man outside with a horse waiting on ye."

How many scurries across the little garden and eager gatherings about the steeds; for Eva and

Kathleen, having put common sense behind them, were determined to take Moira's views now ; to hunt and make money of their hunters seemed childishly easy. . . . Patsy, a youth engaged to tidy up the stables, and mind the purchases to come, was buoyant with hope. "When you'd larn a horse to cross the country there was no knowing the price he'd go to," he told them. "Up in Cahirvally and in Cork, faix, they'd throw you out a hundred pound as aisy as a man'd drink whisky." Patsy whistled gay tunes as he thought of his own future life ; he endeavoured, with praiseworthy patience, to absorb all the directions which were pointed out for his guidance—to crush the oats, and chop the hay, and feed four times daily. "Faith, 'tis ladies' maids them hunters'd want," said Patsy to himself. "Them is things easier said to be done than done," he observed later, and proceeded to forget all he had heard.

Moira pored over Fitzwygram and other books until her brain whirled, and she was inclined to think that the Röntgen rays were her one chance of judging bone and unsoundness. But, even filled with that little knowledge which is worse than none, she realised that the first wave of the equine flood was not one of hunters. She dispatched them sternly, assuring disappointed owners that they did not want horses to draw "cyars" or ploughs, but those of shape and quality to fly over the fences at Ballydare. In vain did Miles Hennessy, the postman, assure them that his cob was the very one to match them. "For, faix, there wasn't a field you'd put him in, the schamer, but he'd level the gap to get out ; weren't they tired from raising sthones afther him?

An' that cliver he was, even a green bank wouldn't sthop him, for what he couldn't knock, faix, he'd crawl over on his stchomack, savin' your presence, Miss Eva. Didn't they find him but lasht week with his hind legs at home an' his foremosht parts in Dan Daly's afther grass, an' he grazing quite contínted?"

Moira, with certain bitter memories of rides upon this prodigy, and its firm refusal to jump any fence, even upon its "stchomack," was obdurate. Even strong hints of gratitude due for these mounts had to be ignored, and the pony, a ragged brown scarecrow, sent away.

Then Clancy, a cousin of the smith's, swept upon them with a broken-kneed, vicious mare—a dejected example of how little food a horse can preserve life on. Having heard they wanted a hunting horse, "Begob, there was a chance for them. Lep—she'd lep the say if you set it before her. But a fortnight pasht, on meetin' a mothor, didn't she clear the fince off the road, cyar an' all, with ould Mrs. Maguire weighin' down one fall ov it? And what couldn't she jump with nothin' on her but a saddle an' one of the young ladies!"

The girls shook their heads. The collar-marked, light-middled wreck could never be hunted. She was, if they had known it, without a good point in her unhappy body; had curbs as big as eggs, bog spavin, and was a speedy cutter. Even Moira, who, confused by a chapter on young horses' points, would hold forth hopes that some of the woolly, hairy-heeled colts might improve into wonders, knew the mare was hopeless. So the flood of horses ebbed, and no flotsam full of treasure remained upon their shore.

The Hermit came often, and smiled politely. He proved useful, for he could wrench open unwilling jaws, and tell a horse's age, thereby preventing the purchase of a rather good-looking black which the owner declared to be five off, and which the Hermit pronounced to be three.

"And, being that age, will probably make a useful brougham horse," he said in his quiet way.

Eva grew dispirited, and Moira's eyes lost their serene hopefulness, but there were interludes of exciting letters from Ballydare. Such houses as they had hoped for were quite beyond their means. One could not pay a hundred pounds a year out of their small capital. They wrote and wrote again until better news came. There was a little house, The Beeches, on the Castleknock road, furnished, with stabling for three horses, and a garden. It was generally let to married officers, but one, leaving hurriedly, would sublet at a sacrifice; namely, for fifty pounds a year. They must wire should they wish to secure it.

There was a garden, a yard, a croquet lawn, sufficient rooms. The three girls pored over the letter, and Patsy was hastily dispatched upon a borrowed jennet, with a reply-paid wire; they could not rest until this treasure in houses was secured to them for a year. The agent in distant Ballydare read the wire and smiled faintly. The real reason for Major Trevenna's abrupt cessation of tenancy had not been stated in his description of The Beeches. He replied with a pleased haste, stating that agreement followed.

Old Biddy, through all this excitement, stalked through life unappeased. She termed the change

"thapesin," the horse dealing "childer's nonsense." "Whin min themselves could be taken in, what could young ladies expect? Didn't her own brother bring home a horse that'd neither lead nor dhrive, but bruk the schafts of the cyar twice, and was nigh to killin' Mike with a belt of his hoof? Fifteen pounds he paid, a five he got, and he a man of sense."

Biddy's conservative heart was also wrung by the recipes culled from *The Ladies' Illustrated* and brought to her to prepare, that the little dinners they meant to give might do them credit at Ballydare. She shied at French names and garnishes, and denounced the high-priced tins which came from distant shops.

Time was flying, and no horses had arrived. Eva grew dispirited, and even Moira was troubled, when Patsy came tearing in to announce that "Jimmy Mack from beyont the hills had heard they wanted hunthers, and was bringin' over the grandest, breediest mare you ever clapped an eye on. She was outside on the road no less. Like one ye'd see racin', that gintale and thin in the legs."

Moira, who had set her mind upon preparing a new dish for lunch, upset a pile of chopped parsley, handed the recipe to Biddy, and fled hurriedly, her heart beating. This should be hers. The others followed her. Jimmy Mack, a lanky man with a guileless face and benevolent mouth, was holding a lengthy, ragged grey mare. She had fine sloping shoulders, a head well set on, and long pasterns, which made her movements attractive. That she missed a rib, had a waist as slim as a girl's, was tied in below the knee, and had curby hocks, were things absolutely unnoticed by the three rapturous admirers.

"She'll do for me," Moira whispered hoarsely; her great wisdom restraining her from an audible cry of delight.

"Yes, this might do." This remark was made audibly as Moira, with a knowing air, ran slender fingers down the mare's thin legs, while Jimmy Mack prayed to his gods that the dust on the off-knee, so carefully plastered on, might remain to cover a palpable mark.

Moira stood back, none the wiser for her searching examination. Age? Four years. Height? Sixteen hands. Breeding?

This was easy work to answer. Quick words tripped glibly from Mack's kindly mouth. The filly was "by Walmsgate, above in Limerick, the dam an ould Victhor mare, the grand-dam by Solon. Blood it is, ye may say," cried Mr. Mack enthusiastically, "and it goes to me heart to part with the crathur I've reared."

It would not have served Mr. Mack's purpose to confess that he paid ten pounds fifteen for the mare at Castle Island fair, two years before, and knew nothing further of her. . . . To Moira and the others it was precious truth. Moira circled once again, this time with grave respect, feeling it was honour to stand upon the road with Mack and this equine princess.

"Ye see 'tis nearly clean bred she is." Mack perceived the impression he had made. "'Tis Punchestown she should be at. An' for thrainin', I'll tell ye no lies." Jimmy Mack, honest man, swallowed noisily. "I have her handled but little: she was out in the fields, but sure she can lep like a deer. Miss Bennet

behind is mad for to get her ; but I, bein' a fusht cousin of the smith's, brought her over to give the young ladies first chanst." He walked the mare up and down and awaited results.

The grey pranced airily, head up and tail out. Patsy whispered heated praises from behind his hand. "Fit to race, with that long tail on her and thim darlin' bits of shins, that, begob, ye could put yer hand round. An' the bind in her ankle joints ! Faix, 'tis chasing ye they'll be, Miss Moira, on her."

With a voice which trembled Moira asked the price, and Jimmy Mack, who had fixed thirty as a sum beyond his dearest hopes, said "Fifty to you, miss," in the tone of one who confers a deep favour.

Fifty pounds for this magnificent animal—for this creature of breeding and beauty ! They looked at Mack with gentle pity, while he waited with his eyes down and his face serene. Why did poor men toil in offices when gold-mines, masked by grey hairs, lay undiscovered in the Kerry hills ? Two hundred, two fifty—this one animal alone would pay for their year's outing.

"It is for nothing, surely," Eva whispered ; but her pocket was saved by Patsy, who, thrusting himself forward with a grunt of contempt, suggested in heavy undertone that none but children would give a price asked.

"An', maybe, ye'd be glad to see thirty-five, Jimmy Mack," said Patsy, feeling in his turn the mare's legs. As they strayed near some suspicious enlargement above the coronet, and Mr. Mack was unaware of the depth of Patsy's ignorance, he offered to split the difference with suspicious alacrity. So that

Patsy, fast assuming the airs of a man who buys largely, wrangled, and Mack argued, and the mare changed hands for forty-three pounds ten shillings, with the half-sovereign back for luck, and was led away to the stables, while Mack contemplated a slip of coloured paper, firmly signed Eva Considine, and searched his pockets for silver and coppers to make up the ten shillings.

"An' God be with the day the old lady was tuk," said James Mack piously, as he strode towards his home, paying no visit to his cousin.

The girls ran to the yard to see Patsy carry out the order to immediately clean and tidy up the new purchase. But ere they reached it they were greeted by a wailing shriek, and by Patsy flying for safety, crying that the schamer had him hunted, a trample of hoofs, followed by an open-mouthed head at the stable door, confirming this statement. Mr. Mack was at this moment wondering whom the mare would bite first.

"Didn't she meet her teeth on me throuser?" declaimed Patsy, indignant at slurs cast upon his management of horses. "I declare to God, before the brush was on her the white of her eye was as big as her head, and she had her teeth sharpened, lookin' for a shpot. Jennits and horses I've minded," said Patsy, mending his garments with a rusty pin, "but the like of her I never was afther."

At this juncture the Hermit, a fishing-rod over his shoulder, came into the yard. At his voice—or, as Patsy described it, "the roar he let"—the mare retired, leaning against the side of the box, with the tail of her eye searching for Patsy.

"So this is the beginning." The Hermit looked at the trembling mare, checking her inclination to rush at him with successive shouts.

Moira, remarking that the poor darling was nervous, dispatched her sisters for carrots and apples, and Patsy for oats, and fell into a dream of names—Arthur, Solon, Victor. What a harvest to reap from! With quick ardour she settled on The Star, and commenced to paint it on the door with some whitewash.

"Well bred?" guessed the Hermit, still studying.

Moira ran through the string of names with pride.

"Oh, then, this is one of Mack's—Jimmy Mack's," said the Hermit easily; "that's his usual pedigree. I heard he'd got a grey they couldn't stable."

Moira sniffed angrily and looked blank.

"And sound?" he asked, as the others came back.

"Sound! Oh, well——" Moira's face fell suddenly. In her wild longing for this mare she had forgotten the item of soundness.

Patsy, being accused of cowardice, made gloomy way into the stable. Aided by the Hermit, and the butt end of the landing net, they got a head collar on to The Star.

"I declare to the hivins ye'd see the heels of her shakin' to be at ye," remarked Patsy, as, strengthened by further roars from the Hermit, he tied The Star up and proceeded to clean her.

Tremayne ran his long fingers down the mare's legs. He eyed her light middle, her curby hocks, her weak pasterns, and having murmured "Lord Almighty!" more than once, he stood back musing.

Moira watched him contemptuously. What could Oliver Tremayne, the Hermit, know of horses?

"Forty-three pounds." He dodged a lashing heel and slipped out, while Patsy cleaned in a mute agony of terror.

"Isn't she worth it? For nothing?" Moira, pink cheeked, her hands full of carrots, which she feared to go in and offer, questioned him angrily.

"I have seldom," said the Hermit pleasantly, "seen more items included at the price. Absolutely nothing extra for curby hocks, a broken knee, and sidebones."

Here, seeing dismay in Eva's eyes, and a glitter of tears in Moira's, he hastened to add that neither ailment might cause lameness. But Moira, realising that her wisdom had failed her at the very first trial, felt she hated the Hermit. She started away moodily, while Kathleen, full of her new cookery, bade the Hermit to luncheon. "We've a lovely make up of chicken. Moira and I left it to Biddy to do, when the horse came," she said, and called to the old woman, asking for luncheon and the new dish. A kind old face, framed by a quilled white cap, was thrust through the window; a pink-covered weekly paper fell upon the garden path.

"Ready is it!" Biddy assumed her nearest approach to severity. "When I read it over, 'two breasts of chickens,' no less, an' all manner of quare things. An', in any case, Miss Kathleen, couldn't do it if I put in legs an' all, for don't ye know the mincer's broke since ye thrun it at Brady's ass for comin' on to the flower garden? But the chicken's there, an' a bit of bacon, ready an' all. Bether than

any kennels ever was made." She withdrew her head sharply.

The Hermit picked up the paper and gravely read the recipe for quenelles.

"I think," he said softly, as he followed the three Considines to the little dining-room, "that one sensible person will go to the great world at Ballydare."

CHAPTER III

BEYOND THE PURPLE HILLS

WITH The Star, a little shaken, shining in her box, while Patsy, filled with fear, brushed her grey coat to smoothness, something had been done towards completing the stud for Ballydare. Moira, reading her books, decided the Hermit was completely wrong, and Patsy, upholding her, declared there was hardly a horse ploughing but had "thim bits of bumps above the foremost feet."

Gentle treatment having slightly melted the grey's heart, Patsy returned to his former rapture of admiration, and the countryside was called in to admire.

Training must begin immediately. Eva's face grew longer as she signed cheque after cheque, payment for horse clothing, bridles, saddles—their own three-horned things were quite impossible—all from the best makers, and consequently at the best prices. Moira ordered and they followed her impetuous lead.

They pored over advertisements and lists. When specious cheapness would have led them aside as they ordered their saddles, the Hermit stepped in. He explained the horrors of sore backs, and insisted on three Champion & Wiltons being immediately

ordered—and saw Eva groan at the cheque with a placid callousness.

Patsy shone forth in new clothes and tan gaiters; The Star's blue rugs were, he declared, fit for a king's quilt; the smell of new leather permeated the house, and the hire of the smith's pony and cart (no longer lent for nothing), sent to fetch the packing cases, was no small item in Eva's account book.

Then when the days closed in, and they sat about a glowing peat fire, there were other things to talk of; then Eva and Kathleen joined in, and patterns of stuffs and silks and cloths were felt and peered at. Three new habits, many new frocks, were necessities. They must go fully fledged into this great world, and many sheets of paper were used up as they wrote from shop to shop, buying extensively. If Moira leaned towards expensive leather, she determined to save in clothes. *The Ladies' Illustrated* gave the names of cheap places, and the Miss Considines robed themselves with a gorgeous unsuitability in shop garments of many descriptions. Biddy, looking wryly at some of the first assortments, failed in sympathy.

"Miss Eva," she said, "had a hump on her like a camel in that new thrapsin gown, and Miss Moira'd niver ate a bit of dinner if she fastened the waisht of hers." Faint hints to Biddy as to wearing different caps at Ballydare were immediately seen and scorned.

"If they couldn't put up with her as she was, better get a new one to go away." A protest which brought a wave of loving girls about her—girls with wet eyes, who forgot everything else as they declaimed their love for old Bid—and were ashamed of

their request. She had nursed them, scolded them, spoilt them, for nearly seventeen years, representing to them the only love they had known at Borrisdeane. Biddy wept also, growing lonely as the change grew nearer—old plants uproot badly. She wandered with wistful eyes among her chickens and ducks, and sat gloomily as she milked the good red cow, now going to another home. Poor Strawberry, whose sturdy calves were a yearly income, and with one now, red and white, which was growing up to replace her.

With the new cavesson duly adjusted, with new knee-caps on her knees, and with lumpy bandages wound about her thin shanks, The Star went forth to be trained.

The fields all round were fenced with trappy rotten banks, and there was always full permission to take horses over them. The mare was keenness itself; her late owner had not overrated her flying powers. She flew everything she was put at, and the result was not happy. She was taken—at a walk—up the narrow overgrown banks, which a horse must top or fall over; and The Star, with determination worthy of a better cause, fell. There was not a ditch but opened its jaws to receive her. She would struggle up unabashed, looking round rather as if she expected to be praised for getting up so quickly, and then unchecked by "wo-as" and "steadies"—fall into the next. Stone walls were different; when put at one fencing a gap she would tuck up her long legs and skim over easily, but banks were not of her world. Moira, rushing beside her, declared stoutly that it must be only a matter of practice, as, for the tenth

time on the second day's schooling, she beheld Patsy travelling up the steep of a bank on his stomach, impelled by the suddenly tightened rope as the mare vanished into a deep ditch, and he, as he declared wearily, keeping a tight strain on to make her put her feet on the brambles.

"An' that's the fourth time she to meet that fince. An obstinate thing she is, that won't be said by her betthers," he concluded, dragging the mare out.

The Hermit, whip in hand, came to help with the schooling.

"For God's sake, keep her for the Deshford side, where there are only stone walls," he entreated unhappily. "I'm afraid she'll never learn to jump."

Moira, stroking her round chin, found many causes: youth, high breeding, over-eagerness, Patsy's lack of firmness. If he held the mare harder she must learn to change upon the banks.

Patsy, declaring that "if 'twas all that lay between him an' drowndin'," he couldn't hold the rope tighter, approached the next fence, The Star prancing airily.

Moira, as she stood and directed, asked the Hermit with quick curiosity what he knew of Ballydare.

"Oh, something," he said evasively. "There now! Look!" and his eyes rested unhappily upon the alleged descendant of Solon as she pushed an undismayed and sour-eyed head, festooned with trails of bramble, from her eleventh ditch. Also, with the groan of one who finds old bruises, Patsy fell again, having strained upon the rope with all his strength.

"Come up, Asteroid," said the Hermit unkindly, whipping the grey out.

"'Tis pride," said Patsy, removing the brambles. 'Too grand she is, I suppose, and too breedy to put her foot on anything. Didn't I say to Miss Moira, 'tis between the flags she should be?"

The Hermit, unkindly muttering something concerning between the shafts of a hack car, seized the rope himself and took the mare at the next fence. He tried complete freedom, which The Star acknowledged by flying the whole fence cleverly, and landing with a foot to spare.

"She'll never make a hunter, and she'll turn upside-down when she's tired," said the Hermit unhappily, looking at Moira.

On one of the days when this unhappy training was not proceeding, Patsy announced that there was a woeful great camel of a horse outside, belonging to one Cassidy, that might suit.

Eva flew out to see a great lumpy bay with a heavy head and great round jointed legs. Eva's eyes were taken by strength; the bay had points about him which were capable of convincing an inexperienced judge that he was a weight-carrying hunter.

"Up to a ton of weight," the owner said proudly, omitting to remark that it would have been more suitable at the horse's heels than at his head.

"We were doing common work with him," said Cassidy, "and John Brady's fusht cousin bein' dead, we druv this one to the funeral, and says John Brady himself, says he, 'There's shapes about that one, so take him down to the Miss Considines, that's looking for hunthers,' so with that we untackled him, and young Father Dennehy, that was there, got up

on him, an' the horse jumped a gap clivir as a Christian. An' thin he med at a bank—a God's thruth it is—but he was up an' down the same as a spidther, nivir lavin' hould of the fince."

Eva listened impressed. She had her saddle put on and sat upon the great fat back, feeling as though a tower of strength moved beneath her.

The price was low, a nervous vet. passed the horse practically sound, but was unkind enough to hope, very nervously, that the bay wouldn't be too slow for the brougham, and finally, the great beast, speedily christened Gog, was eased through the door of the stable next to The Star, where she screamed at him peevishly.

The Hermit seemed bereft of words when he saw the new purchase. He only shook his head, and remarked that some things were too big to comment on.

There was no temper about Gog. Patsy said he was a dacent horse entirely. He suffered cleaning with surprised benevolence; he ate apples and carrots and anything he could find, including a straw bed a night when he had finished his hay. His hairy underlip absolutely quivered for food. Also, he was so deliberate, and so very gentle, that when he joined The Star in her ditch-prospecting hours, Eva was able to lead him herself.

True, the Hermit's whip was not unneeded as the big horse paused before a bank; but once he recognised the inevitable, Gog would rise with a grunting groan, land accurately on the narrow top, search among thorns and brambles for secure footing, and with a mighty lurch pound safely into the far field.

The Hermit, who was given to obscure speeches, said that he really believed the big horse would not put Eva down, and that he would make a good hunter when hounds ran backwards, and Eva, who thought this might be a term of sport, said happily that she hoped he would. Kathleen, who came to watch, said she thought that she would rather not try to make money on young horses. She said her experience might be one which would not jump at all, and that she was nervous, so pleaded for a small sum of money with which to buy a trained and valueless screw, but one which would carry her safely.

The Hermit's brows were knitted as he saw the last day's schooling, his heart was ill at ease; the Ballydare banks were formidable fences, and he feared for Moira and her equine Star.

"She might do over fly fences," he said unhappily. "I tell you what, Moira, I'll give you sixty pounds for her, and you can buy another with the money."

Sixty pounds! How Moira scoffed at him, with golden visions of duplicated hundreds lying before her! The Star had been a bargain. Where for such a sum could she buy another, with long swishing tail and slim legs? Already Moira pictured the sensation she would create at the first meet at Ballydare: heads turning, voices questioning. Who was she, that pretty girl on the beautiful thoroughbred mare? She was not quite sure whether if offered two hundred by the Master on that very first day that she would not be generous to her sisters and accept it. Moira held a vague idea that all Masters wished to buy any very fine new horses. Then some heavy man would

take Gog, and they could buy again, and write to tell the stupid Hermit, who never said anything encouraging.

The day dreams glowed as the girls pored over silks and chiffons, and wrung Mary Dillon's, the village modiste's heart, by insisting on her copying pictures of new and elaborate blouses illustrated in various papers. Conquests, save in penny novelettes, are not made in shabby frocks, and Moira meant life at Ballydare to be a series of conquests.

Eva was less enthusiastic. Romance had touched her life a summer before, and gone out of it unexpectedly. But Eva, building her dreams, was full of gentle hope that some day it might come again, so Ballydare did not mean so much to her. Yet she said nothing, and Moira, unsuspecting, believed she drove the chariots of all three to fame, fun, and fortune.

Time flitted, the present tenant of The Beeches left, and the agent announced that all was prepared for their arrival. Already fallen leaves made ochre-coloured heaps, while autumn touched others with his gorgeous brush. Scarlet and gold and orange and brown flared in the woods at Borrisdeane, showing across the water, now growing grey and cold, the rushes were yellowing to sour, chilled melancholy. It was high time for horses to get in wind. Even still there were many things to buy; and as the three floundered in the sea of their many wants the Hermit would come to their rescue, showing a strange knowledge of the world's ways and prices, listening as they chattered of hunting and dances and parties, of the whirl of gaieties which

awaited them, and listening with a curious smile behind his eyes which puzzled Eva and made Moira furious.

All the world lay in front, yet farewells are always sad. Something made the three very quiet as they sat for the last time round the turf fire, their little room sulking under a sense of unrest. Boxes and bundles littered floor and sofas, forgotten directions brought them to their feet every moment, and the shuffle, shuffle of Biddy's feet, the jangle of keys and constant opening and shutting of cupboard doors seemed a sound which could not cease.

The shrill insistence of her directions as she cried to a helper in the kitchen echoed at each door. "Katie, there's them pots of currant jam, pack them up—with the flour-bag. Look now, one's mouldy; let ye take it to Mrs. Naylor for her cough, and, Katie, I have the old apern found that's lost these two years. Take it and put it in with the chickens."

Biddy was no light thing to move. Nothing must be wasted, nothing left behind. With moist eyes she scanned her favourite hens, and chose two from the flock; she packed a brood of fluffy chickens in a basket; she gathered scraps of food and stores until the luggage swelled to mountainous proportions, and the carts which came to fetch it seemed all inadequate. It was grey dawn when they started loading, and there was a distinct possibility of missing the train by the time the wobbling, roped packages creaked away down the narrow road. Even then Mr. Clancy's donkey had to be borrowed for the overflow.

Breakfast was hasty and uncomfortable, and there

was an absolute feeling of deserting a patient friend when they drove away from the tiny house, leaving Nancy Hourigan shutting shutters, as she promised fervently to mind it all as her eye's apple.

"An—she—she that won't light a turf sod till we're in the thrain back," said Biddy bitterly; and here the old woman, clasping her basket of chickens, broke to open weeping. Eva sniffed, and even Moira's eyes were damp as she looked back at the lake. The smith's cob went forward at a merry amble on up to the rise, from which one could see the sea—a tumble of hoary crests and glittering water under a sighing westerly wind. Then they turned towards the tiny station, from which the railway line wound its snaky trails across to the base of the hills.

A horse-box stood at the siding. Regrets were forgotten as the two hunters, swaddled in blue rugs, hooded, knee-capped, bandaged, came prancing round to be put in. That is, The Star pranced and Gog plodded with heavy dignity. The hum of admiration and awed excitement which arose from the crowd—there is always a crowd in Ireland at train time—was a foretaste of triumph to come. Moira listened proudly.

"Look, begob. Aren't they grand! scarce a thing can ye see but tails an' heads of thim. Hunters, no less; wasn't Patsy the lucky bhoy, sittin' up proud an' aisy on the great horse? Her that kicked, that was Mack's grey, that wint near to brain his ould father. Maybe afther all she'd kill Patsy, and he might as well be at home. An' the big wan was Cassidy's from over beyant; aisy to ride a hunt on him, begob, for 'twould be a sthrait fince he wouldn't knock if he

walked on it. Weren't they wondtherful, Miss Moira and Miss Eva, to be thryin' to cross counthry on thim two quare lots?"

Moira ceased listening at this point, directing Patsy to box the horses. They were early, and it was well, for though Gog, always glad to rest, walked up the steep slope of the box with incurious calmness, The Star would have none of it. She wheeled with a scream of rage, and it was fully twenty minutes before, pushed and whipped by every one who could get near enough, she was dragged into place. The flap fell with a clang, and from the cheerful pounding of her heels as Patsy fled out through the window they knew that all was well with her.

"She'd go out of her way to sphite ye," declaimed Patsy breathlessly. "I tell ye, if she saw the ingin coming an' knew we had no time, she'd not go in at all. I declare to God, the swheat is runnin' off her in rivers now."

Patsy's heart was wrung by the nervous, fretful brute, who refused her food, bit and kicked and broke out, and apparently spent her existence in trying to worry him.

The long line was still empty. The girls, breathless from the contest, left the horse-box and came on to the platform. All Borrisdeane seemed to have come to bid them God-speed.

The old doctor was there, brick-complexioned and white-haired, a kindly old man, who sped about the cottages, combating with superstition and want of air. He forbore to grumble at furniture all put upside down, curtains pinned up, and a poor departed lying ill at ease on a hard mattress lest the evil spirits

should find a place to sit on ere the funeral. That, he said, did not matter, for once dead a man was out of his charge; but to wrestle with consumption in close cupboard-bedrooms with windows mortared in, and the patients talking cheerily of their own funerals, to find children in croup out wheezing to death among the chickens or the doorsteps, and women with children two days old milking cows, had wrinkled his brow sadly. He carried half a chicken now wrapped in newspaper, and some eggs in a paper bag. There was Miss Butler—whose beaded mantle Moira had condemned—with a pot of jam and home-made buttered scones for their tea when they got in, she said. There was the Rector's wife, showering exhortations and advice.

"Oh, it was an undertaking. She hoped it would not prove a bad one. They must be very quiet now, very dignified, as they were to live alone."

"Brave children!" This from the doctor. "Going off to follow the dogs. Oh, you'll never come back from there; the soldiers will take you." This was a witticism, but he blew his red nose.

Biddy, still weeping, sat upon a truck, forlornly carrying her basket of fluffy chickens, and guarding the large wooden box holding the two hens and the old grey cat, a board dividing them. A mighty pile of boxes, bundles, baskets, and trunks grew heavenwards upon the platform.

"They'll charge you extra, Moira. You should have had a van."

Homely, kindly, old Borrisdeane friends, remonstrating and applauding, they gathered round Eva and Kathleen; and Moira, having returned to take

a look at The Star, found herself alone with the Hermit. It was his "roar" which had finally driven the grey mare to her box, his hand which had held her as she tried to dash out again, but through it all he had never spoken.

Moira looked at him. As she looked it dawned upon her for the first time that he was good to look at, and that his heathery Harris tweed clothes had never been made in Kerry.

"Well," she said breathlessly. Moira looked very pretty with flushed face and shining eyes, a powder of grey hairs on her dark grey coat.

"I hope it may not be ill, Moira," said the Hermit slowly, his eyes fixed on her.

Moira shrugged her shoulders. Why should this Oliver Tremayne stand aloof—would not dub them heroines and wondrously brave? Why should the laugh behind his eyes make her uncomfortable? "I believe you'd be glad if it was ill," she flashed out, and then felt ashamed.

"That speech," he said, "I must forgive. And tell me, Moira"—he came nearer to her, so close that his hand touched her sleeve—"do you still think Borrisdeane the worst place in the world?"

"A place to live out of," she said imperiously. "That is all." Yet involuntarily she followed his glance as he looked across the lake to the woods about his house, past it over brown bog land, up over scarred craggy crests to the purple hills she was to pass beyond to-day; lonely in its beauty, fresh and sweet with its clean, salt-laden breeze. He sighed as he looked, knowing the healing it had brought him.

"There are worse places," he said, half to himself. "Hot streets, glaring rooms, glitter, and flash, and hurry, and nothing true among it all. But perhaps you will think so still, Moira, when your eyes have looked on the wonderful world you are going to; and you must go unbiassed." Then he smiled and spoke aloud: "Honestly, I hope it may be a great success: that you may be social lights, and have the time you dream of. But if, in this social whirlpool, people should take up your scheme all wrong; if they should not be civil at Ballydare; if it's not quite what you expect—will you write and let the old Hermit know, Moira?" he said pleadingly.

Moira stared at him, a growing misgiving, a loneliness she had never dreamt of feeling, catching at her throat. Oliver Tremayne, the Hermit! A man who went nowhere, knew no one, offering to help in social troubles! Foolishly, for what troubles could there be? They were the Miss Considines—well connected, pretty. Of course they would know every one worth knowing at Ballydare.

It was Moira who looked away now across silver water to mist-capped hills. Something stung in her eyes—the desolation of the upheaval wrought upon her, the doctor's red, white-whiskered face grew suddenly dear. Moira felt suddenly that beads were pretty things to trim a satin mantle with; how they glittered now in the sun as old Miss Butler fluttered and clucked, not unlike her beloved Orpington hens. Biddy's sister, a tottering crone, cast curses on journeyings to "furrin parts" with loud-voiced vigour.

"Supposing it wasn't all roses," said the quiet voice

beside Moira, "this piece of—well, this trip. Would you tell me, Moira? Let me help?"

The instinct to hurt because you are hurt swayed Moira. She gulped away something in her throat, winked back stinging tears, and because she must not cry she whipped herself to foolish anger.

"Oh, you! You've crabbed my idea from the first," she said stormily. "Why shouldn't people be nice? Why shouldn't we have a good time away from this wretched place? We—no, if we do fail—we want none of your help," and then could have bitten her tongue off as the Hermit, nodding his tweed-capped head, looked at her and stepped back.

Something screamed on the line. The station-master took up what he termed "the sthick," and at a leisurely amble the train panted in; there was no more time. Willing hands wrestled with the assortment of luggage, while the guard, who was a kindly man, merely suggested that he'd probably be killed when a few things fell on him at the next stop, also that God might see to the storing of any further passengers' luggage, but he would not. This last was when Andy Hannan dropped the flat-irons and a frying-pan on the railway servant's toes. The engine, with a grunt, backed to take up the horse-box. The girls were packed into a carriage and overwhelmed with farewells; but through it all the Hermit, a quiet, silent figure in well-worn tweeds, stood aloof.

The engine having backed for the horse-box—from which Patsy shrieked later of The Star's doings—hooked up the rest of the train. It was time to go.

Eva thrust her head out. "The Hermit," she cried. "The Hermit. He has never said good-bye!"

"He is tiresome and idiotic," stormed Moira. Yet she ran to the window, put Eva aside, and waved her hands as they went out. But the Hermit, looking up at the hills, never seemed to see.

CHAPTER IV

BALLYDARE

THE mid-day train, travelling leisurely, bore the three Miss Considines on to seek their fortunes. It jolted by the edge of the flat bog-land, where they knew every dark-hued pool and mossy tussock; it toiled up a steep incline, until the trees of Borrisdeane were lost to sight, and they crawled between the mountain and the sea. At one side grim, scarred hillside, heather clinging to crevices, grey stone gleaming as it cropped up to slab or point, towered and frowned down at the line. On the other the cliffs fell, sheer and steep, to the sea. They seemed to totter above the far down-wash of the waves, as the train edged round the steep curves.

What cold, grave things these purple hills were as they steamed beneath them, with no blur of outline or veil of silver mist, but menacing, sternly angry with the mortals who trailed their way along their sides.

The seats were hard and uncomfortable, the heap of parcels slid continuously, declining to remain where they were placed. Now it was the eggs, their fall followed by a thin ooze of yellow from the paper box; now the jam; then a medley of cooking things

tied up at the last moment, and bulging spouts and handles shamelessly. A fellow-traveller eyed them with suspicion, and was heard to murmur "caravaners" to the meek parson by her side. She was resentful, too, when the frying-pan, having deliberately worked itself free, fell upon her rose-trimmed hat.

But the stations swelled from mere sheds to long buildings, where pictures of mustard and soap and pills made the world hideous; where there were porters and signal-boxes and other trains sliding by. And they knew it was the world at last, as they waited at Maryborough, and, bidden to "sthand back," saw the Dublin-bound mail tear by—a screeching, dusty blur, with a glimpse of saloon carriages and a long mail-van.

They had travelled far; they were dusty, tired, and hungry, but as they wiped the grit from their eyes Moira's voice whipped them to enthusiasm. "This was life: that was how people in the world travelled, roaring by stations straight to some great town. If we had lived for ever at Borrisdeane," she said, "we should not have seen that train."

Eva, worn out by a heated argument relating to the quantity and weight of their luggage, agreed languidly. She was not sure that she ever wanted to see any train again.

Biddy, clinging gloomily to her chickens and the wooden box, was, on the contrary, roused to sour remonstrance.

"A crying shame," she said. "Rushing pasht us here, with nivir a wait in it to pick up thim that wants to travel on."

On Moira's sharply replying that they did not want to go to Dublin, Biddy retorted that "the dhriver might have waited to see. I'd like to see Mikey Donellan racing through a station like that," she said indignantly.

They comforted themselves with tea, and changed on to the line for Ballydare. The difficulty of Biddy's live-stock being adjusted with some silver, they filled up a carriage to overflowing, and in the dim evening, with the skies weeping thinly, they arrived at their destination.

It was a small town, straddling across the wide River Dare; a poor little place, if they had known, only rendered important by its salmon and its hounds.

They rushed to the window as they steamed in, but there was nothing to see but lights twinkling through a blur of rain, and the cold gloom of a big station. They must wait for day to see the promised land.

Moira's awed voice whispered of the station's vastness: of what a splendid town it must be. Yet they were far more forlorn than triumphant as they waited on the ill-lighted platform and saw fresh faces eddy about them, no one to give them greeting. With boats burnt to the water's edge they had landed on unknown shores.

The agent had arranged for a cart, but not, as the man in charge said, for a van load, so there was a further period of weariness while their porter, who was a person of resource, vanished into the wet darkness and returned with a supplement of donkey carts, which proved sufficient. He gave thanks for a liberal

tip, and wished them all success as he helped to unearth The Star—now a mere wreck upheld by horse collars and wooden partitions—from her travelling carriage.

"Sure a sight of people came for the huntin'," he assured them as they confided some of their plans. Horses, according to his account, seemed to descend upon Ballydare wedged in boxes and cattle-trucks, and to come ramping out upon the platform, and to depend for safety entirely upon his skill and care in unloading. After this Eva felt that it could not be less than half-a-crown, but she sighed as she gave it. The entries in her little account book were growing appallingly long.

The car which took them out upon the strange, wide road went swiftly along, carrying them to the arms of fate. The Beeches had been sketched mentally and verbally many times. A small house, but neat and compact, no straggling waste of hall and curious unneeded corners as at Lake Cottage. A yard square and formal, with its range of boxes, its lofts, and its saddle-room. The stables in Kerry were small, with apologies to the memories of long-past cows, and Biddy and Patsy had fought with an unceasing vigour for a warm corner near the kitchen fire.

Their hearts beat quickly, they turned and peered and chattered as the car with a rasp of catching steps turned in a narrow gate, and pulled up a second later at an open door. No ground had been wasted on an avenue. A dapper young man, who did not trouble to remove his hat, was silhouetted against flickering candle light. He either wanted his supper or

possessed an appointment, judging by his worried manner. Having thrust some keys into their hands and informed them that Mr. Guinane had ordered in oil, coal, milk, and everything else they had asked for, he vanished into the dripping night. The three stood together, gathering fortitude, as their dream vision of their new house faded. This, blinking at them through the falling mist, was a little slated lump of discomfort, standing close to, in fact almost upon, the wide road.

They bumped into the passage representing a hall, peered into fireless, comfortless cupboards which represented sitting-rooms, and sat down simultaneously suddenly and helplessly upon anything they could find, peering at each other furtively to see if any one thought it better than it was. That Eva chose the chicken basket and Moira the wooden home of cat and hens made their rest short, while the carman's voice with mild sarcasm wished to know if they wanted him to wait to drive away next morning. Having grossly overcharged them, he dodged the loaded carts now arriving, and departed satisfied.

Biddy was overwrought and weary, and having removed and let out the pets, a crescendo of unhappy comment drifted from the kitchen.

"Sorra a pot or a pan fit to cook in, and the kettle as full of fur as a rabbit's coat. The taste of a range that was there might be out of a doll's house, it might, an' you couldn't warm your hands at it, let alone cook." This wave of discovery and objection was broken by a shriek of anger, as Grey Jenny and the dorkings, their sense of honour blunted by

hunger, severally drank the milk and got into the flour bag.

At this point the trample of hoofs made diversion, and they went to the stables. But these were no better than the house. A three-cornered patch reft from the side of the road represented the yard; some sheds built against the high wall, the lauded loose boxes.

Patsy, a lantern in his hand, was declaiming he'd not wrong his "mother's ould ass by askin' her to sthay there." As it was, several bars had to be taken down to make room for Gog, while further on The Star's long weak legs, almost too tired to kick, strayed into a cobbled, uneven passage. And Patsy, who was not optimistic, opined that she'd probably "casht herself an' die."

"Oh, how I wish," said Eva petulantly, "that we had stayed at Borrisdeane."

It was too much. Moira suddenly leant against a door-post and wept aloud—bitterly—moving Patsy in a passion of contrition to affirm that the contrariness of The Star would surely keep her alive, and, in any case, he'd "be up and down all night ready to bate her whin she sthuck." Moira's grief also induced one of the owners of the donkey carts to call curses from heaven on "Misther Guinane, who'd got another poor craythur to take the house."

This man, a kindly, grey-bearded old person with benevolence and love of porter striving for mastery in his old face, further recounted many things: how no one could keep a horse in the stables, "because the clather on the road'd drive 'em mad." How the Trevennas and many others had left and sought

better lodgment; and how the house belonged to Mr. Guinane himself, and, save for the lack of officers' wives, "who musht live some place, 'd niver be let at all." But James Dunne was a blessing, not in disguise. With the quick kindliness of his race he took the girls under his wing; wrangled with the owners of the other carts, and arranged payment with words of contempt; sped forth into the night and returned with milk; drove the other men to carry in all the bundles to their allotted places, and finally, gathering coal and wood, lighted a fire in the little sitting-room, diffusing a pleasant odour of turf smoke and porter as he invoked deeper curses on the agent for omitting to "put a match to the grates."

When firelight flickered on the little room, and the curtains were drawn, and Biddy produced hot bread, eggs, and bacon, and tea, the world grew less desolate. They sat down to eat hungrily, while Biddy, who declared she was glad to find "one dacent soul in foreign parts," bade James Dunne to share her supper. The frizzle of bacon and hiss of frying eggs told that Mr. Dunne's virtue had not gone unrewarded, cementing a friendship which did not prove fleeting, and proved profitable to both sides.

Strong tea, warm fire, and bright light rubbed out discomfort. Moira forgot her tears, and let her tongue run riot. After all, the size of the rooms did not matter. The stables could be arranged. In flights of golden fancy she pictured the future they would make; the cheques which must come for The Star and Gog; the inevitable success which must be theirs, and the strangers they would meet—and then

her voice ceased, for she seemed to see a quiet figure with its face turned away to distant mist-capped hills.

Rest, elusive and scarcely satisfactory, was sought upon hard mattresses and springless beds, broken also by the faithfulness of Patsy, as thrice during the night he tramped forth waving his lantern and abjuring The Star for the love of God above not to lie down on him and be killed. "'Tisn't for yerself I'd care," he was heard to declaim the third time, unaware that Moira's anxious eyes peered from her window upon his scanty costume. "But for poor Miss Moira within, that's fool enough to like ye, ye divil"—the last staccato words being induced by bitter memory of many injuries and a sudden leap to avoid a weary kick directed at him by the grey mare.

Then Moira went to sleep, to dream, not of glitter and money-making, but of a flying train which took her backwards, ever backwards, to a land of crested seas, of purple hills, and a streak of silver water, into which she fell while a tweed-clad man with a landing net put it over her head, and cried "folly" as he dragged her out.

Joy cometh in the morning. It was absent at The Beeches, Ballydare, on October 8th. There was scant comfort in the early shrilling of Patsy, heard through a mist of sleepiness, that "the grey had scrhaps med of her sthall kickin' it, and 'twas Gog that was down and couldn't get up," scanter still as the naked hideousness of the little house stood forth with almost indecent emphasis in the morning light. Mr. Guinane was evidently a thrifty man: where money could be spared he spared it. The furniture

of the bedrooms (two on the ground floor and one up a boarded ladder, called a staircase) clearly emanated from different auctions, and had been the odd lots there even then. Cracked, fly-blown looking-glasses ; deal tables plastered over with white paint ; scraps of sodden carpet on dusty floors; rusty beds and broken chairs. They had never recognised that Aunt Martha's home was pretty, that their eyes from childhood had opened on to the mellowness of satin-wood and deep-coloured mahogany, all of which had passed unnoticed and unappreciated.

The little angular drawing-room had been a nest of deep couches and old cosy chairs, all rosy soft-hued chintz and downy cushions. Here the barrenness was faintly hidden by the cheapest cretonne, black and staring pink; four high-backed chairs were of kitchen origin, and proved to be stuffed with hay, and the others, of yellow wicker, resented occupation with hideous creaks, while the dirty walls were scarred and streaked where the soldier tenants' pictures and china had hung.

The dining-room was modest in dingy browns, and the chimney smoked. Judging by the atmosphere and the smuts, it had commenced with a vigour worthy of a week's rest ; now it was languid and even sly, waiting quietly until a Miss Considine came to warm herself, and then puffing a cloud of evil-smelling foulness into her face.

Biddy, who looked years older, and was sneezing vigorously, observed that she was on her knees for an hour before it, and also delivered a message from Patsy, saying " the mare was safe, but was coughing

like an ingin and wouldn't ate a taste of oats ; further, that they needn't come out, for he had Gog bate up on his legs."

It needed many golden dreams to keep the Miss Considines merry as they got through breakfast. Strawberry or her cream belonged to Borrisdeane ; they must drink milk, watery and blue, in their tea. The bacon was from across the seas, the butter was bad. China, as the furniture, had been accepted and unnoticed at Lake Cottage. The breakfast set they had left behind was Lowestoft, all strewn with little roses—a joy to see. They held the thick blue-and-white cups of Mr. Guinane's choosing fastidiously, and the constant rumble of coal carts outside brought sad memories of the liquid lapping of the lake.

Yet the very deepness of discomfort induced reaction. They banded their hopes for the future together, and tried to make the best of it all. Money, a little money—here Eva sighed—would make the house habitable. Moira made her way to the stables and Eva to the kitchen.

The Star had saved a carpenter some work. Her small stall was in ruins, and she shivered dejectedly, looking pensively at her feed of oats. Patsy, writing laboriously, was busy upon a list of his wants. By taking down and building up, room could be made—the slates, which showed the sky, must be lined ; there were no mangers. Moira, never dreaming of applying to the agent, who was really owner, wrote it all down. The timely arrival of James Dunne relieved her of much anxiety.

Mr. Dunne, who, when he was sober, was apparently

master of all trades, arrived to see how they were. He could carpenter, he could slate; he peered at the gaps, and politely wished Mikey Guinane a night's rest below them in the rain. With small respect for The Star's heels, he measured and calculated, and promised that the grey should rest that night without fear of injury, also hoping that she might not die, for he "minded wonst, whin workin' out with Sir Ralph, the old masther of hounds, to hear a horse cough like that, and, faix, the dogs ate her. 'Twas newmonnicey, the docthor said; but if one didn't know that complaint you'd say she was wrong of her lungs."

He recommended mustard on The Star's throat, having first invited himself to dinner, and departed for wood, and nails, and putty, and holdfasts, and many other things which seemed exceedingly expensive, for all goods bought by James Dunne must pay their toll of porter.

It was a weary morning. Patsy got mustard into his eye and very little on The Star's throat. The lanky, weak brute was removed to the cold comfort of the passage, and shivered miserably, refusing all food. There was no one except James Dunne to direct or advise. Fitzwygram was not yet unpacked.

Eva, in the kitchen, was in no better plight. With gloomy decision Biddy reeled forth her list of wants: saucepans, kettles, frying-pans, baking-sheets. The kitchen seemed to have been provided with the same carefulness as the rest of the house, and anything which hadn't got a hole in it was far too rusty ever to be used.

"Scorched, I am," said Biddy, whose eyelids were red, "iviry time I walk between the table and the fire. An whin I wint to move the table back, sure 'tis nelt firm an' sthiff to the flure. An' upstairs, Miss Eva, I'm sleeping with the sparrows undther the eves, with a wind that'd dhrive ships across me face. I'd sind Patsy there, but he says he has to be near the horses. An' sorra the bit of cabbage in the garding, or even a sthalk of parsley, and oh, Miss Eva, Miss Eva, why did we come here at all?"

Eva, comforting Biddy, echoed the words. The sparrows' nest must be settled, the pots and pans purchased, the stables re-made. Moira's dream of success was not all as it should be. This constant, sordid paying had no part in it. Eva, crying a little also, yet afraid to show defeat so early, said it would all be well.

"There will be things to go to, Biddy—balls and parties. Miss Moira and Miss Kathleen would never have gone out at Borrisdeane," she said, sniffing.

"Young men they're lookin' for," said Biddy, grimly truthful, scrubbing her one frying-pan. "Hadn't ye thim same where ye came from, and no money to pay to see thim?"

The extreme truth of this last remark sent Eva away and out into the front. The presents from Borrisdeane had provided them with provisions for to-day, but she must go to the town and order for the morrow. She went out the narrow door and looked about her. A strip of unkempt grass, pock-marked by empty flower-beds, represented the fine lawn; a further strip the field. The garden was a patch of the size of the yard, and the constant rumble of the

carts outside came with a monotonous jar of unrest. Further off, bugles shrilled calls, and some one practised discordantly, evidently endeavouring to learn some tune. Moira joined her, and Kathleen, who had allowed her elders to bear the burden of thought while she unpacked, came out also.

There were no mountains at Ballydare. The country stretched in humping greenness, sometimes rising to a slight hill; but there was no frown of purple nests, mist-hooded or cut clear and dark; no lap of waters as they shivered through the reeds; no distant boom of mighty waves. This was inland, flat and tame. They could see the barracks to the right; a walk to the gate showed the town, nestling in the hollow about the river. This new world had nothing grand about it after all. Some ideas of fine buildings, tall spires, and bustle of life and prosperity vanished as the dream of The Beeches had gone, but looking, they said nothing about it.

"We must go into the town." Moira, brushing straws from her tangled head, pointed to the grey houses. "Write a cheque, Eva, for Patsy wants loads of things."

"And so does Biddy," said Eva, sighing.

Kathleen, from the background, said she thought Mr. Guinane could not be a nice man. Her sentiment was echoed by the returning James Dunne, now a little mellow from porter, who observed that "thim that had dalins' with Mike Guinane'd be glad to have their next ones with the divil himself for chice. Didn't he casht me out of a house," burst out James, revealing the true reason for his bias, "and I payin' what I could for it iviry year? Nivir an

hour's good I done since, for the loss ov it wint to me heart." Here, having wiped his eyes, Dunne directed them to the town, gloomily wished that Mike Guinane's back was one of the boards he was about to drive the nails through, and passed on to his work.

"We shall put on," said Moira, "our best dresses. We shall get down about twelve. There will," went on Moira, with the air of one talking of Bond Street, "be lots of people about then."

The simultaneous diving of three heads into three trunks was soon followed by the appearance of three young women robed severally in purple, grey, and mauve, each garment being very much be-ribboned and be-trimmed to a suggestion of smartness not altogether suitable to the country. Crowned by three steepling hats of the latest and most curious fashion, and embellished by three great fluffy boas, the three Miss Considines, inwardly quaking lest they should not be smart enough, looked as if they were leaving for some festive gathering. Their radiance elicited a "Glory be" from Patsy and a "God save yer pretty faces" from Mr. Dunne, who was now working hard. This was all as it should be, and, with rustle of silk and trot of high heels, they set forth to meet their fate.

The road to the town was, unfortunately, muddy; it was worse when, directed by some friendly carters, they turned aside by the walls of the barracks, and went down a filthy, footpathless lane, where the utmost care could not save their skirts. It seemed to be the home of soldiers' wives, for many children and scraps of uniforms overflowed from the narrow door-

ways, and, as they passed, curious women coming out to look wafted from lip to lip audible comments as to the three being the Gillespies.

Moira took occasion to point out that they were mistaken for some of the salt of Ballydare's earth. "The nice people must dress just as we do," she said proudly, straightening her plumed hat. "Oh, we shall have a great time here!"

They wriggled through a disobliging turnstile, and walked by the side of the Dare as it slipped between low banks to the distant sea.

But the town, the glitter of shop windows, the buzz of motors, the bustle of life came not.

"I am afraid," said Eva slowly, "that, after all, it is not a large place."

Moira said sharply that it must be; it was a hunting centre; it was written of in *Dublin Society*; yet as they crossed an old stone bridge and turned into a narrow street, Ballydare fell upon them with a wet gloom deeper than that of The Beeches. A little dirty, straggling place of one street, no finer, not even so fine, as Tramee, where they had bought their mourning. The same smattering of grocers' dusty windows, the same dreary little drapers', with the year-old blouses displayed on tottering stands, the same medley of country people drifting along the centre of the road.

The pavement was not wide enough to hold them abreast, as, in their finery, they rustled along, staring eagerly about them. But heads were turned as they passed. A woman in a pony-trap spoke to the shopman where they had made some purchases, evidently asking their names — a handsome woman, heavily

veiled, with a red-faced boy of about twenty beside her.

What she said was "Impossible," with a shrug of her shoulders; but Moira, winking at her first spotted veil, took it for unbounded admiration.

Ballydare, as it shopped, quietly shook its respectable head: coats and skirts and plain caps looked askance at the rustle of unsuitable finery. Moira, staring about her, saw signs of opulence; a big motor warred with the donkey carts, and the pony-trap which they had first noticed was one of exceeding smartness.

Moira observed their occupants as future callers; she said airily that people in motors would suit best, as they had no spare stable. The feeling of causing remark, the novelty of silken linings, brought a wave of extravagance in its train. They went into the better-looking shops, and ordered what they wanted, with a calm disregard of the cost.

Eva's gentle voice, as she gave her name, made the owner of the motor, purchasing at the same time, look at them with inquiry in her eyes.

"A charming accent," said Mrs. Knox to her fat husband. "I must go to see them if any one else calls."

Patsy required hay and straw and oats; blissful minutes were spent talking to the affable purveyor of horse food. He appeared to have nothing to do, and talked of hunting with a ready tongue; told them they would see sport over a fine grass country, and pointed out two or three leading lights who happened to pass by.

The lady in the pony-trap was Mrs. Vereker, of

Knock Castle. Oh, very rich entirely, and hunting every day hounds met. The young gentleman with her was her only son. The stout lady in the motor was Mrs. Knox ; she rode, too.

"And—aren't there some people called Gillespie here?" asked Moira.

Mr. Foley couldn't call his mind to them. And, then, there was Mister Moroney, the Master, passing now.

A rush of be-plumed heads came nearer the door to gaze at this wondrous being. A little thin man, with a keen, melancholy face, shuffling along as if a great deal of him was broken, as he trundled a bicycle down the muddy road.

Mr. Foley gave a description of the M.F.H.'s prowess which might have made his ears burn.

"He does be at the finces as if they was good to eat," said the seller of forage, "and into thim or over thim 'tis all one to him. Such courage was nivir seen. An' he's as pleasant spoken an' quiet, but if you were to lep on one of his dogs, as innocent as you'd be, you'd be better underground than listinin' to the remarks he'd pass on you. I did it mesilf once," said Foley, sighing, "An' he came a week later to buy hay, and whin he chose it I asked him if the dog was dead. 'If 'twas,' says he, snappin' his mouth—'if 'twas, 'tis matches I'd have here to-day instead of a cheque,' says he. 'That was Cornet,' says he, 'you jumped on, an' if my breath hadn't given out, I'd have said a few things to you. . . .' An' I to go away after five minutes, afraid they'd be notin' the words he used against him at the judgment," finished Foley sadly.

Donough Moroney had paused to speak to a friend, so they still watched him. He represented to Moira the future owner of The Star; so, connecting the two, she gave a description of her precious mare which caused Mr. Foley to blink deferentially, and to inform her that she would never keep such a paragon.

"Misther Moroney'll buy her, miss," he said emphatically; "that stamp is rare now."

As Moira had carefully described a combination of a Derby winner, a chaser, and a sixteen-stone hunter, it undoubtedly was.

"The queer things people buys," said Foley contemptuously, as he noted the order. "I was at Malleady's forge a day or two ago, an' I saw a grey there you'd be ashamed of in a weddin' coach, that they said was a lady's hunter."

Moira stared at him dubiously—a twinge of horrid doubt assailing her—then felt it could not be.

There passed then two girls who seemed to echo their own method of dressing—be-plumed and be-frilled, with long-tailed gowns.

"And who are those people?" Eva asked eagerly.

"Oh, them's—them's Geoghans," observed Mr. Foley curtly.

The three were very happy, as, having smelt at and chosen hay, they left the sweet-smelling barns for the dirty streets.

Biddy had requested provisions, and the purchase of two pounds of chops, which Eva insisted on carrying, seemed a descent unworthy of the day. The butcher had looked contemptuous.

But nothing could check Moira's tongue. "Wait until they sold The Star for two hundred. Why not for three? I might get anything from that little Master man. Of course I must buy another," she declaimed; "two others for fifty or sixty each. Real beauties like The Star, and then when I sell those their price will keep me for years."

In the glory of her fervid imaginings Moira spun dervish-wise upon the narrow pavement, striking the parcel of chops from Eva's hand: the string gave, and the neat little pieces of pink-and-white mutton were scattered into the mud, under the oncoming front wheel of Donough Moroney's bicycle.

He splashed off on to the dirty road, staring gloomily first at the chops and then at the crimson-cheeked trio.

"Pick 'em up?" he said sadly. I'm afraid he stirred a chop with a thoughtful toe. "Rather muddy, eh?"

He looked again from girls to chops, from plumed hats, white boas, and silken frills, to the five pieces of mutton and the brown paper, until unconquerable laughter bubbled and surged below the melancholy of his thin face.

Two pouncing curs seized the chops hungrily.

"That settles it. Dinner gone," said Moroney, lifting his hat and speeding on; but they could see him laugh. As Eva wrestled for one chop, still upon the paper, with another dog, she observed that Mr. Vereker, driving past slowly, had also seen the incident, and was highly amused.

"They'll . . . laugh at . . . Oh, Eva, how could you carry them?" wailed Moira.

Eva, angrily abandoning her last piece of mutton, said it was all Moira's fault, with her horses and her hundreds. She also declared that they must dine upon eggs and bacon, for their money was simply flying at this rate.

They walked on dejectedly, and the little town as they passed on by the river bank seemed to shrink and grow meaner and less like the world.

Youth is fortunately elastic. As they reached the turnstile they were again discussing the new people they had seen.

"I wonder," said Moira, "who the Gillespies can be; the family name, perhaps, of the Ballydares," she said, with the pleased air of one who has solved a problem.

They squeezed through the turnstile as she spoke. The wall opposite was disfigured with posters and advertisements, and among them, flaring in gaudy yellow and blue and salmon, the figures of three girls in scanty costume, riding several horses at once into a pea-green chasm of space. It was flanked by the announcement that the sisters Gillespie, the celebrated equestrians, would, with others, perform in Machay's circus on the morrow at the market-place.

The name seemed to step out and smack Moira hard upon the cheek, as her horrified and hasty method of turning away brought it to the attention of her sisters.

They said nothing, and observing a muddy and dilapidated path over the field, with one accord ploughed through rather than again face the commenting eyes of the soldiers' wives; but the

long-tailed gowns were put away with a finality which boded ill for their future outings in the town.

"We seem fated to do stupid things about sheep," said Eva, as they ate fried eggs with a hunger which yearned for chops.

CHAPTER V

SOME SHEEP AND OTHER THINGS

THREE days were spent in a dusty, hammering chaos, with constant rushes to the town by Patsy for things forgotten, and with seemingly endless arrivals of parcels, and a scurry of wild haste lest the rush of callers should arrive before they were ready. At the end of this time new chintzes, photographs, and cushions had transformed their bare rooms, and the three girls drew breath and looked happier. The cost, entered in Eva's book, was a thing to be lightly dwelt on. The black and pink cretonne was eclipsed; there were fresh chairs and new tea-sets, and as Kathleen arranged flowers and tinted leaves the little square drawing-room was almost pretty.

Outside, under the skilful hands of Mr. Dunne, who now dined daily, The Star and Gog were safely housed, the slates had been mended, and even Biddy was protected from draughts by her new friend's arrangement of what he termed a "scre-an," nailed over with sacks and the old carpets, which had been replaced by rugs. The overtime working of James Dunne, to save the old woman

from chill, had necessitated both tea and supper each day.

The Star recovered rapidly; her cough proved to be what Patsy called "a thing of nothing"; and Moira suggested a ride. The newly arrived saddles were adjusted, declared to fit well, while the owners stood to admire. The Star looked lovely, perfect. Moira clasped her hands in something approaching ecstasy as she scanned the long, weak mare. Gog—on whom the new saddle was a mere hint of leather, and whose smartness was marred by the yellow straps, too short to meet, being secured by string—Eva thought that Gog must really be worth a great deal of money; horses up to his height were not easy to find out hunting. The mighty beast squeezed his placid way out, and stood blinking as Eva was flung up by Patsy. The Star, swishing her long tail, followed. Moira cuddled her knees about the new pommels with a sigh of pride, chattering triumphantly.

"How they would hate to sell, and yet they must at the very first big offer; they could not afford to be sentimental even with these beauties. How lovely these small saddles looked."

The horses had been to the forge the day before, and the vigour of her speech almost drowned milder murmurs from Patsy, who said the smith "was unaisy about the mare's foremosht hind tendon, and that he had declared to God he'd rather shoe a soup-plate than Gog's foot."

"An hour he was," said Patsy, as he circled about them, polishing and adjusting with true pride in his horses, "hating iron till he stretch a huntin' shoe

to fit; and, faith, he wouldn't believe me at first but that 'twas funnin' I was whin I said the big horse was to cross country. 'Isn't he up to great weight?' says I. 'He is, behind him,' says he, short-like; an' thin I up and tould him what a lepper he was, and how, whin The Sthar'd be fallin', Gog'd sthand above clivir and sinsible, and nivir put the feet astray. 'They make the fences strong in your country,' said he, jealous-like for we to have so fine a horse. An' I have the new crub bit on The Sthar, Miss Moira, for she had a like to kill me yesterday."

Moira took up the double reins dubiously; her experience had not lain with curbs. She was far from happy in the flat, neat Champion & Wilton, with its lack of the old-fashioned rise at the far side.

The mare pranced out uneasily, wincing at the bit. A month's oats had wrought havoc in her wicked nature. She sidled as they passed a cart, humped up her long back, laid back her ears, and decided on mischief. So far, her only outing had been straight—the broad road, and on to the forge in the town. Moira saw a narrow lane to the left, just beyond the barracks, and suggested turning up it. The Star thought of the forge; she flicked up her Roman nose and wheeled back towards the town. Moira turned her sharply; the grey wheeled again, this time with short, irritated plunge. Gog, standing still, considered the mare dispassionately from under his long lashes.

"She seems cross. Oh! go on," cried Moira, tightening the reins. "Patsy has been spoiling her."

"Hit her," suggested Eva.

Moira took up her whip. A trap was bowling swiftly from the barracks, and this scene of sulkiness was not to be before strangers. She wrenched sharply at the bridle and hit hard, a stinging blow falling on the mare's shoulder. What followed was confusion. A sudden, terrifying sensation of sitting on nothing, of clinging wildly to a grey mane while angry hoofs pawed the air, and The Star as she swayed seemed about to topple backwards. Eva wailed. Gog cocked one ear. One of the men jumped from the dogcart, and as he caught the bridle, The Star came to earth with a sliding jar, pulled down by a heavy hand.

"She—oh! isn't that rearing?" said Moira, still clinging to the mare.

A man in grey tweeds said it was something very like it. "Not only that, but she almost came back," he added sharply. "Has she done it before?"

Moira said "No" indignantly. "She merely wanted to go again to the forge. You see, she's only been on one road, and doesn't know her way here. It can't be vice, because she's the gentlest——"

"Brute!" ejaculated the rescuer hastily; for The Star, rendered peevish by restraint, suddenly caught him by the arm, and tried to shake him. "I'll get her at the side," he remarked, "and hold on while you get fixed."

The rear and plunge had distinctly disarranged Moira. A tail of sunny hair was straggling from under her sailor hat; her veil, always a difficulty, was

under one ear. She dropped the reins and put up her arms, staring as she did so at the stranger, her eyes full of excited surmise.

A tall fair fellow, excessively neat as to grey tweeds and white collar; a fatuous expression of content with himself straying from his mouth to rather heavy cheeks, his eyes expressing little save that he considered the world a fairly decent place to contain his important self; one of the men who did all things superlatively just before he essayed them, and who could always coin excuses, completely satisfying himself, when he fell short of fulfilling his boasts. After dinner and fruity port, no man could keep nearer hounds, shoot more birds, or do more to hint down other men's reputations with depreciative shoulders and mouth. In broad daylight, with hounds running mute on a breast-high scent, or driven birds coming down wind, Captain Lancelot Milton always bestrode a bad horse, or held a bad gun to his shoulder. Yet great is the power of a ready tongue. Many people accepted him at his own valuation. Mr. Stanley, a meek, thin youth, who sat quietly in the dogcart, commenced to talk to Eva.

"This is not a lady's horse." Milton kept a wary eye on The Star's teeth. "You—I suppose you've taken The Beeches. We heard of you. I'm in the Midshires." Here he introduced himself with difficulty, as The Star objected to doffed hats.

"She's a young one," said Moira loftily. "We can't—we like them untrained, and of course she's a little wild." The veil wriggled off completely,

giving Milton a glimpse of a merry, mutinous face and shining eyes, filled with a somewhat awed admiration. It was Moira's first introduction to what Biddy called "one o' thim sodjer min like ye're dada." Visions of scarlet uniforms, of clashing swords, of endless gaiety, and flavour of unknown wickedness circled in Moira's brain. She was realising her dreams. She was looking into the eyes, not of Captain Lancelot Milton, but of the embodied young men she had conjured up. When could Ballydare have produced this?

"One must ride a rearer with care," objured Milton. "I had one once; cured it completely, I assure you. I'll ride that one for you, if you'll let me, some day. The other carried me top hole for years after I bested him." He spoke with kindly condescension.

Eva gently remarked that when Moira had done dressing herself she thought they might move on.

Moira took up the reins and bent forward eagerly. She hoped Captain Milton would come to see them—soon—they would be at home in the afternoon, if he and his friend would come to tea.

Captain Milton's cheeks became even more fatuous, his manner still more condescending.

He was full of engagements—bridge, in fact. Moira blushed a little, and murmured, "Some other time." But he would come, he and Stanley, to-morrow afternoon.

"Come, oh do," said Moira eagerly. "We've been so lonely—seen no one yet."

Milton remarked as he got into the dogcart that the girl was simply ripping pretty, and likely to be some fun. Further, that he s'posed they'd money or they couldn't come to hunt like that; and he drove on to his luncheon party with an expression marking thought for him.

The Star now proceeded affably, tossing her lean Roman nose, and taking roads as she was bidden, but Eva was inclined to reproach Moira for having pressed two young men to come to see them, and Moira, whose high spirits had risen to their utmost, was more than disposed to resent this check, so that for some time the ride was marred by strained relations.

Finally Eva's gentle nature melted to resignation and an acceptance of her sister's views, and then Moira's fancy winged its way as might the great Nulli Secundus. A patch of gorse set dark green in low-lying fields brought them to a stand; it was their first view of a fox covert.

They left the road by a low stone gap, which Gog scattered in ruins, and pulled up peering into the prickly depths. They would stand here later; watch the pack pour in, not through; hear the first whimper, which sends its shock through the field, and which makes every man cram down his hat, tighten his reins, and sit waiting; the whimper taken up and echoed, swelling to a crashing chorus; the lifting of the whip's cap; the long shrill of the "Go-o-ne away"; the bustle, rush, and flurry ere hounds settle down, and those who mean to ride come out right and left, keen-eyed and alert, while the others melt from fence to fence, and tail away, enjoying themselves in their own way.

What a bank that was to the left, high and green, with a ditch at the taking-off side. Moira peered into it unhappily ; another bank beyond—a built gap to the left or a wide rushy water jump. Ballydare was no funker's paradise. There were hedges on many of the fences ; thorns growing blackly, leaving few spaces to get through, so that hounds once away were quickly lost : and to see a hunt one must make no delay. Hunting did not seem as easy a thing as it had at Borrisdeane. What if The Star fell as she had done schooling ; if, after all, Moira did not show the M.F.H. the way in the first run.

"'Tis full up of thim," said a voice close by.

They started to see a man had come across the field behind them.

"Two lithers, no less within, and divil a hin or a turkey safe for miles round since the pups was born Didn't he—didn't he whip a gandther from Mrs Malone but yesterday, and she feeding thim in the morning? Faith, she's away to-day to lay complaints to the Hunt. Be dam to the vilyins."

Moira trusted that he alluded to the foxes, but felt doubtful.

"But great sport it is," he continued, "sure ye'd see that bank there foreninst ye with tin down at it ; there's a cleared ditch outside it. I cot three horses misilf the last meet here, and one the Master's. 'Mat Malone,' says he, as he mountin', 'I'll pay ye for iviry chicken ye lie about,' and away wid him like a mothor cyar. I tell ye that was a hunt an' a half. Out here he broke across the bank—signs bye we dug one of them horses

out—up across Cassidy's and pasht on to the trees,"—his finger pointed to a fir wood some five miles away—"and down again this way, and killed him just by Clancy's farm across the river. The finest hunt for the year, I tell ye." With wide eyes they followed the line up the swelling slopes to the dark wood, out again to the silver streak of water and the slated house beyond it. It would take a good horse to gallop those eight or nine miles, across heavy going, closely fenced. Moira touched The Star's thin mane. If the blood of Solon and Victor counted, surely her mare could do it.

With bated breath she told Mat Malone how they had come so far to hunt: how they had never seen fox or hounds, or ridden across a country, and had bought these horses to do it on.

"Be dam, but ye're great," he remarked earnestly. He eyed their horses with an intelligent air. "An they not to know how to lep either," he concluded sadly, "half an hour some one'll be raisin' the wall they levelled."

As The Star had soared over some two feet above the stones, Moira burst into indignant protests, and explained how their mounts had been schooled for many days, and how the stone knocking was merely Gog's cleverness.

"There's some ye couldn't larn," said Malone easily, clearly unimpressed.

Eva, turning Gog to what she thought might be a becoming angle, asked Malone if he was not a mighty weight carrier, assuring him at the same time of Gog's wondrous jumping powers, his deliberation, his perfect safety.

Mr. Malone allowed his eye to travel again from the ponderous frame down to the ponderous limbs. Scratching his head thoughtfully, he remarked that he feared the fields would be the difficulty.

Eva, imagining some strange trap into which a heavy horse might fall, looked at the grass with distrust.

"Crossing them," explained Malone. "Oh, that soort will do it at their own time, but, sure, tisn't hounds' time. Size isn't all, miss," he added kindly, "as maybe the man that sould ye him left a dhray idle. But, sure, there's many a day he might do ye well. Many days whin the smhell is slhack." He looked at The Star again, took in her sidebones and other embellishments, and muttered "God above us" several times, as if it relieved him, otherwise he made no comment, save that he "saw a mare like that to hunt at Ballydare once—one day—not again."

"And she was sold," cried Moira at once. She glanced at Eva.

"She was not, but killed," said Malone thoughtfully. "Three finces from here."

"Now, I've a bit of a cob inside," he went on, nodding towards a thatched house close by. "An' I'd like ye to see him. Begonnes, if ye'd wait, I'll let ye see him leppin'." He ran off.

They waited in silence. Weight carriers, it became apparent, must be something more than large, and the simile referring to the mare who was like The Star had not been encouraging.

"He's just jealous," said Moira suddenly, as Mat

Malone reappeared, riding, with consummate skill, an ugly bay brown cob, a shade over fifteen hands, with a big knee, fired hocks, half a dozen bad knocks, and the most perfect forehand ever seen on a horse. Behind the saddle he was light, but powerful. Reins on neck, the cob came flying across the low bank, and for the next few minutes the Considines saw a series of ugly fences taken in perfect style, by a perfectly trained hunter. Prop and steady at the big bank; on it with an easy bound, out far into the next field with hind legs well under him; lightning change on a high grassy fence; easy fly, with just a rap of ready heels over the stone wall; long lurch across the water,—and all with cocked ears, as if he loved it. This was fencing as it should be, without constant sounding of ditches or long ruminations on each broad bank.

"Sure's he med to do it," said Malone, as he pulled the little horse up. "There's one ye ought to have, an' none of yer ploughboys or sphiders."

Neither girl would for worlds have owned to the other the sudden deep longing to abandon hopes of making money, and to possess this blemished little beast: the big green fields would dwarf then, and the thought of flying to that distant wood be a joy and not a menace.

"I buys an' I sells," remarked Malone, "young horses, not the class of this. I have two beauties within. But this one, sure I got him a swhap from Mrs. Magee, whose son ounded him; a swhap for an ould inside cyar I had whin he was juist afther kickin' her own to splinters on the way to mass.

A new cloak he tore on her, and she was all for getting out of him. An' faix, I knew there wasn't such a lepper from this to Cork, so with a bit more here an' there, a few turnips, an' a broken saddle, I got him."

Eva dragged her eyes from the cob, and, kicking Gog, asked Malone if they would not find it very easy to sell their two horses down here.

"An' why not?" he said pleasantly; "why not?" thereby comforting Eva greatly. The private thoughts of Mat Malone, which dwelt upon a farmer and a hack car-driver, were his own affairs. They approached the small bank and put the horses over it, Gog acquitting himself with leisurely perfection, and The Star putting her head up and flying the whole thing with an awkward, plunging bound.

"Begonnes, but ye are great," said Malone thoughtfully; and having again scratched his head, and said "God above us," he informed them that, "afther all, if they waited the gaps'd be levelled and the banks thrampled they would get on." Ere they had time to resent this, a motor came panting along the road, and The Star, with a squeal of anguish, first reared and then flew three times round the field, only restrained with great difficulty from jumping the big bank or rushing over the high stone wall. The motor was pulled up, and, as The Star subsided, Eva was riding forward to thank the occupants, when she observed that they were not looking at her, but at a stream of white-woolled sheep which were, one by one, trailing out on to the road over the ruins of the stone gap. The lady sitting by the driver was gesticulating furiously.

"That's Mrs. Vereker, of Knock Castle, and thim's her prize sheeps what ye're let out," said Mat Malone softly; "they do kape thim here till the huntin' commences." With an uncanny swiftness he had melted to the far side of the small bank, and was smiling pleasantly.

Eva, gasping, suggested his helping to turn the flock.

"Faix, we didn't sphake these five year pasht," said Malone genially; "since Mrs. Vereker turned me out of the covert keepin' and the land. So let her catch her own sheeps, an' divil mend her." Here bidding them "good morning," he rode off.

The Considines' horrified eyes beheld the unavailing efforts of a solitary young man to surround and drive back the "sheeps," and their ears heard all too plainly the rasping directions and comments of the lady, who remained in the car.

Moira, having calmed The Star, timidly proffered help—an offer marred by the fact that no power on earth would induce the grey mare to pass the throbbing car.

From the muffling depths of a motor-veil, a cruelly chill voice delivered some opinions on knocking down fences leading to a road—heard indistinctly, as The Star darted, plunging from the vicinity of the car and was brought back, and all lost by Eva, who urged her mighty steed on to help.

As Moira, for the third time, brought The Star within speaking distance, Mrs. Vereker half turned, raking the girl with goggled eyes. "I presume you are one

of the Miss Considines," she said, and having delivered herself of this remark made no further comment or reply to Moira's explanations.

Twenty sheep, when pursued by a girl on a horse and an over-hasty young man, take time to collect. The woolly brutes huddled with maddening meekness against gates; then, when collected, suddenly discover a gap and vanish in white and obstinate line through it into some forbidden field; they would gather, foolish-faced, upon the road, and, when driven, scatter past the right turn and rush up a lane-way there, as if they had at last discovered the way they were wanted to go. It was half an hour before Dennis Vereker, a loose-jointed young fellow with a pleasant red face, returned in triumph, Gog tramping magnificently by his side and the sheep wobbling in front.

By this time he and Eva were quite old friends, shrieking breathless directions to each other and bitter wishes at the sheep. As they came down to the car, Dennis explained confidentially that he would never have caught them alone, and also that he feared his mater was simply furious. He shyly indicated a notice-board warning trespassers. "They left these prize sheep up here and drove up to look at them almost every day."

"A board which I think you might have seen," said Mrs. Vereker suddenly, seeing her son point to the square of lettered timber. She addressed Moira, and without warning backed the motor to allow the sheep to go in.

At this fresh terror The Star, who had subsided to a grass-munching quiet, felt she had endured enough.

She turned round and kicked the car accurately, the crash of iron-shod hoofs splintering something being too apparent to be overlooked.

Apologies were received in stony silence, and to remain where they were was to court further disaster, so the two rode dejectedly away, leaving Dennis Vereker toiling at rebuilding the wall, while his mother boomed in fury.

"We seem fated to do foolish things in connection with mutton," said Eva sadly. "It was only foolishness, and Mrs. Vereker might have been civil."

Moira said nothing. She was ruminating on that sudden acknowledgment of whom they were, made in a tone which implied that the discovery of their names implied explanation of any offence.

They rode home through a narrow lane, past a wood running up steeply to the right—another fox-covert, had they known; past a hillside of bracken, glowing brown and golden and faded green, and then turning downwards, found their way to the broad road leading back to their new home. Ballydare, as they looked towards it, lay plunged in a tender haze of mist, its house-tops rising dimly, the spires of the old abbey and the chapel clear cut in the higher air—a dull and dirty little town, crouched by the wide salmon stream. The barracks, a gloomy lump of brown buildings, stood out to the east; the song of the practising bugler came in faint discordance. At either side the country stretched tamely, fine in its slopes and valleys from a sportsman's point of view, with nothing to stop the hounds or horses, but

otherwise with no beauty: no swell of mighty hills, no break of crag and butting rock, no thunder of distant surf on a rock-bound shore. Instinctively they pulled the horses up, looking down at the land they had come to.

"I wonder"—Eva let the reins fall on Gog's great neck—"I wonder, Moira, if one ever gets anything by trying too hard for it." Moira understood so well that her "What on earth do you mean?" was exceedingly gruff.

"We have come so far to find fun and pleasure. We have engaged, as it were, to do so much. Will it all be here: dances, parties, charming young men?" Eva's face contracted. "Will they be all we hope for, Moira? We have not begun well; I am not sure that I have not bought a plough horse and you a brute. No one has come to call upon us. For the young men——"

Moira broke in with indignant protest. They had met no fewer than three to-day. Where in Borrisdeane would they come across so charming a personality as that of Captain Milton, so distinctly a man of the world?

"I wouldn't compare him with the Hermit," said Eva slowly.

"With the Hermit!" Yet Moira's shrill of contempt trailed and died. "The Hermit, the shabby——" the quiet, blue-eyed face seemed to look up at her and reproach her. The worn tweeds, after all, had never been shabby. Moira shrugged her shoulders as her voice failed her, and something caught at her throat.

"The Hermit was reliable; he would have known

what to do for The Star's cough, would have helped us in so many ways," went on Eva.

Moira took up the "crub" bit—a proceeding The Star resented exceedingly—and they rode on. The unexpected touch of regret whipped her sharp tongue to action. Always the leader, she led now, directing and advising. They must not appear countrified or ill at ease here; they must be, above all things, up to date, and remember that the stiff courtesy of Borrisdeane was not of this newer world. So, chattering, they came in, to find Patsy, devoured with anxiety, waiting at the gate. He received the account of The Star's behaviour with a shake of his head.

"Up she'd whip ye before ye'd know where ye were," he said. "There's the divil's badness neshtin' in her heart, Miss Moira; and she'll hurt ye yet if she can. A wisp of hay was all they dared to give her before we had to buy her. Get back, ye schamer," he added, as Gog, perceiving the hens' food, edged towards it gently.

A voice raised high drifted from the kitchen window. Moira looked in; Biddy dictated a letter home and James Dunne wrote it for her. The old man sprawled across the sheet of paper, writing laboriously. Biddy talked as she got luncheon ready.

"An' tell her to light the fires—the ould dusht—or 'twill be worse for her"—the letter was to Nancy, now caretaker of Lake Cottage. "Sure, here we are cool and miserable, say, in a bit of a house that's neither convanient or raisonable, with not a pot or pan ready to cook in. Signs by, tell her to scour thim we left.

A poor little town with a few shops with great winders outside and great prices within. An' the roof leakin' in the house ; mind now say agin to keep fires, for if God sint the young ladies a few colds we might be home soon. An' not a soul did we see yet, nor not one have I seen like Misther Tremayne, God bless him, thrampin in an' out as frindly as a beggarman. Tell the ould thief to milk the cow out, an' to tell me if Pat Maguire is dead yet, an who got his bit of money, an' if Mary Cassidy settled up with Mike O'Sullivan. There was but two geese between completin' the match an I lavin', and he's a fine sthrong bhoy to lose for that same. Let alone that Mary is lookin' a long time now."

Moira suddenly remembered that she listened to a private matter, and walked away. Poor Biddy, how she longed to be at home, among all her lifelong friends. The house and cow ; the little happenings of Borrisdeane made the old woman's world. "If God sends us a few colds," grinned Moira, as she went in to change.

Kathleen, her eyes afire, was drinking in a description of Mat Malone's cob. She was the light-weight of the three ; a little blue-eyed girl, with an obstinate disposition cushioned over by a yielding manner.

"He has got several young horses, and one might suit you," said Moira. "You have got nothing yet."

"I shall borrow Gog and go over there to-morrow, just to look," said Kathleen quietly ; but her eyes were alight.

When luncheon was over, and the elaborate toilettes

to receive callers completed, they went to the yard and the company of James Dunne, who was now working to arrange a third stable. From him, as they stood in a chaos of fragrant shavings, odds and ends of wood, hammers, chisels, saws, and nails, they learnt many things: how Mrs. Vereker, whom they had just met, was leader and ruler of Ballydare society. "Not that she was so grand herself"—James drove a nail contemptuously—"but she was handsome entirely years ago, and the ould man had a sight of money. So faix, she thinks more of herself than even the Countess below at the Castle."

Her husband had been dead for many years now, and Dennis Vereker, the loose-limbed, red-faced youth they had seen, was prospective owner of much money and a fine old place.

"Ye'd be afraid to throw a pebble in the garding, for fear ye'd break a glass house," proceeded James, "and the front way up is all statees and queer things in white stone, and savin' yer presence, miss, most of thim without a rag to their backs, and just one or two with a soort of a towel to kape thim warm. God kape the poor haythens long ago if they sthud out in the rain like that. 'Twould give you the creeps now to see thim all in the moonshine of a frosty night, like musheroons in July. An' once I was inside to do a job, and there was more of thim, one poor craythur with niver an arrum on her that the ould butler said was a Vanus. May be they whipped the arrums from her for her bouldness. 'Twas a pity for ye now if ye angered Mrs. Vereker, for the spharks'd fly from her eyes whin she's crossed, and she'd leave neither sthick nor sthone unturned to do ye a mischief."

Further, as Dunne's saw whined, or his plane sang, they heard that Mat Malone was a decent man, who dealt in young horses and rode hard to hounds, and that in consequence of a foolish quarrel with Mrs. Vereker in the hunting field, she had found some pretext for turning him off her land, and causing him much trouble and inconvenience.

"An' being an aisy man he would not let the League take it up," said James, "though he's thrun in his big fine house now, with near a mile to go round to a road; there was a thrack straight out by the fox covert." He told them then how years before, when he himself had been a young carpenter earning good wages, how Mrs. Vereker, then Miss Violet Ellis, had been engaged to some young man, younger than she was, who was over for the hunting. James could not recall the name 'twas like Grattan. "She'd take the sight from ye thin, Miss Eva, with the flash of her eyes and the black of her 'air, and cheeks as red as huntin' coats. The weddin' was fixed, an' the day named, an' the thrying on dhresses every day within at Clancy's, whin back from Australia came ould Vereker, with a white beard on him, but money enough to buy the town. An' he went mad for her, plain for all to see. An' faix she thrun the other away and was Mrs. Vereker in a month. Sure, the young man took it hard an' sphoke quare words to her out huntin' before thim all. Harding, the English whip, tould me, but little she cared, just turned round at him—'twas up by Tulla covert—an' laffed at him. 'Don't be a fool,' says she.

'Isn't money besht ov all, an' *I'm* not going to die,' says she. 'I'll be there yit. I'm not the ould one,' says she, meanin' like. But he cursed her, so he did, and laid a name on her I wouldn't be soilin' ye're ears with, an' Hardin' says though she was white enough, she laffed still.'

"'For he'll come back,' she says to herself whin 'twas over. Hardin' heard, bein' sthuck agin the hedge to see the fox go, an' whin he cried gone away, faix no one could catch Miss Ellis that day, but Misther—Misther—Grattan went harder still, an' near kilt himself before they finished. She has but the one child. Poor Masther Dennis, that can hardly call his soul his own in his inside, for she niver lets him away from her. Oh, she's the hard woman," said James, looking for his hammer. "She's a hard, quare woman, and mortial proud of her looks still."

There were no callers; the evening hushed to a frosty stillness, with a nip of frost in the faint wind; it grew too dark for James to work, and they went in. There was no peace of lapping water and boom of waves at The Beeches, but the constant rumble of the carts and hoarse cries of the drivers as they passed homeward to the distant colliery. The white mist rose to the door, for the house lay low, coming up in clinging, dreary chilliness. They had no fragrant peat to burn here, but slow-burning coal, bought for economy, which glowed dully and without much heat.

They were lonely, sitting down to their tea; eating the cakes prepared for callers, drinking out of the new china and talking with an enthusiasm which

grew strained of all they meant to do when the hunting commenced.

Biddy, coming in, swung the serge curtains to with an energetic swish.

"I'm thinkin'," she said, picking up the new tray, which she objected to strongly, "that ye saw more company at Borrisdeane."

CHAPTER VI

LIFE PROVES DISAPPOINTING

"WILL ye sthep in, please?" said Biddy, opening the door. No persuasion could induce her to adopt what she termed "them flibbi-tigibbits" on her head, and her old-fashioned cap framed her wrinkled face, as it had for years. She had crossed her shawl over, and pinned on a white apron bought by Eva.

Lancelot Milton, captain in his Majesty's Army, had a pretty wit. "The very original Mrs. Noah," he remarked audibly to his subaltern, who was disputing possession of his hat and stick with Biddy.

"Houldin' on to thim same as if he'd come for the rint," said the old woman indignantly, as she made her way back to the kitchen, after having pushed the drawing-room door open with the curt announcement of "Two gintlemin."

The two Miss Considines—Kathleen was missing—had, urged by Moira, arrayed themselves in all their glory. They were bright-coloured representations of the newest fashion-plates—trailing skirts, silken be-frilled blouses, adorned with strange daubs of button and ribbon—as the Borrisdeane artiste had translated

foreign ideas according to her powers. Eva's gentle beauty was almost smothered in crude pink, Moira's triumphed over a concoction of flaring yellow, and nothing but the persistent waggling of her new hair-pads marred her happiness. Buckled high-heeled shoes peeped from a maze of silken frills; their soft arms were bared to the elbow. They had, in fact, made themselves as good copies of the stage young woman as they could, with a fixed idea that any one seeing them would receive an impression of the latest from Paris.

The callers must come; they had been seen in the town, also out riding, although in both cases there had been slight accidents; the rush of Ballydare to welcome them must now commence. The two soldiers had put off their visit until to-day, and Eva hoped there would be enough chairs. A lavish supply of cakes stood in the pantry. Biddy was making hot bread, and had promised to "set" milk for cream. Everything was ready, and the beginning was the entrance of Captain Milton, now in dark blue serge and with violets in his buttonhole.

He looked about him as he sat down, and assured them they had already worked wonders. "Awful little hole; were simply charmed when you took it. Very sporting of you three comin' along like this and chaperonin' each other; must let me help you, if you want advice." He caught Moira's admiring eye, and the fatuous line of his cheeks deepened to a crease. With a winning ease he took them beneath his care, and from the subsequent conversation it was evident that, so far as sport went, he had skimmed the cream of the world's

knowledge. Their stable management, carefully imparted by the Hermit, was of course all wrong. A stroll to the stables left Patsy with a worried expression and a calm determination to accept all advice and alter nothing. Reproofs for untidiness and extravagance had not sweetened his temper. The order to take out all straw each morning to dry was received with unqualified contempt.

"Fine dryin' 'twould get undther the rain," remarked Patsy; "and fine feet the mare'd have pawin' the cobble-stones all day." So far as the edgings of plaited straw, which Captain Milton decided to be a necessity, Patsy's aside "that he was no bashket-maker" was unfortunately audible. Viciousness, Milton then informed them—he was clearly annoyed by Patsy's manner—was merely the result of bad stable management. A horse which kicked in the stable meant a rough and stupid groom. He himself would go up to any horse: here he opened the door of The Star's new box, approaching with a "Whoa, my pretty," as fatuous as his cheeks. His exit, as he dodged to escape a broken shin, was a flurried one.

Patsy was left muttering, and the clear autumn day grew chill. There was no lake to wander by here, no restless hum of sea calling for a walk by its shores, so they went into the tiny square sitting-room, which, with door and window shut, became exceedingly like an oven, and which with either open was a cavern of the winds. Biddy was not a fashionable handmaiden, to be hurried with tea; as the girls knew from long experience, she would be ready at five, but not a moment before; to hustle her into bringing it

early would mean no hot cakes, and probably no cream. The two sat listening, Moira filled with that worship of the new which is youth's joy and trial. Captain Milton, as a soldier, was a being she had never met before, and the mist of her lack of understanding enveloped him, to her, in a rosy halo. She hung upon his words, listened to his great tales of fox-hunting, when at most times it seemed that Captain Milton and the fox were alone with the hounds. There were airy allusions to London, where he lived, to theatres and music-halls, and tales of rout and frolic. The man or woman who had never seen London had not yet commenced to live, and Moira's cheeks glowed with the false shame which is so hard to bear; she who had never walked in that enchanted city, never strolled in the Park on golden summer afternoons, never seen Edmund Payne, Huntley Wright, or Barrington—Milton's taste apparently ran to musical comedy—never supped at the Carlton or the Savoy. She was a mere little barbarian, who ought to feel the greatest pleasure at the condescension of this man of the world. That was the idea which Milton wished to present and impress, and which Moira assimilated as a sponge takes up water. Yet to hold her own a little, and to endeavour not to show her awe, she assumed a manner so far removed from shyness as to be almost aggressive, bandied wit with a hoyden's pertness, and laughed at compliments which merited slapping. Their new friend then learnt with a gasp of horror that they could not play bridge. He would teach them now, immediately. Eva produced her patience cards, a table was cleared, and they commenced.

"Jolly good fun," the two men voted it, for the game as it was played necessitated corrections of many varieties. Their voices rose to a merry pitch, the window, despite the draught, was flung open to let out a cloud of smoke, and the game flourished.

Moira, denounced as a juggins, resented it freely. They laughed, and romped, and enjoyed it all, believing it to be the ways of the heart of the world.

"Trumped your partner's king, you little duffer," Milton roared with laughter. Moira, declaring that she had borne enough, seized the pack and flung it at his head. Now, quite unheeded, a motor had come to the narrow gate; and at this moment the Hon. Mrs. Harman Vereker, exceedingly morose and unwilling, was making her way up the path by the window. The cards, flung with a skilful zest, skimmed out into the evening, falling in a cloud about the astonished lady's head, while the shouts of merriment and crash of the falling table as Milton sprang up came as a more solid blow. She stood transfixed, a tall, well-built figure, glaring at the scene.

"My . . . Holy Saint Christopher! Mrs. Vereker!" said Mr. Stanley weakly, sheltering himself behind the curtain.

"Lord!" said Milton, picking up the table—"Mrs. Vereker of all people."

"I—we are so sorry. Won't you come in?" Eva, quite unaware that some flowers flung at Moira by Captain Milton had caught in her hair and were nodding there airily, came forward with hot cheeks.

"I've—that is, my son—asked me to call." Mrs. Vereker looked back at the car.

"We thought you might not have understood yesterday about those sheep"—Dennis Vereker's red face peered over his mother's shoulder, and his eyes were uneasy—"so we came to call on you."

"Purely to explain," said his mother, with glacial distinctness. "Thank you, Miss—er—Considine, I do not think I shall come in."

"Oh, please," said Eva appealingly, and, with Dennis using pressure at the back, Mrs. Vereker stepped in. She was a tall, handsome woman, with a hard face and cold eyes. The power to rule gleamed from their grey depths; there was arrogance in her glance and haughty, well-cut mouth, and her manner as she looked for a chair indicated the lady of the manor who stoops that she may win a vote. Guest and hostess faced each other, the youthful prettiness of one crowned by two nodding roses, the stern handsomeness of the other by the knave of hearts which had slipped between veil and toque, and nodded his red face almost rakishly at the company. Mr. Stanley, peering round the curtain, choked audibly, and again invoked Saint Christopher—the only remark, in fact, which he made for the rest of the afternoon. Captain Milton stiffened his neck and talked bravely, and Mrs. Vereker sat not unlike a female thundercloud, booming out insufficient replies to gentle overtures.

"We have had so much trouble with the cottage," said Eva.

"Indeed!"

"Miss Moira," observed Biddy from the door, "will

ye lind me a hand in with the tapot? 'Twon't fit on the thray."

Moira fled hastily, and Mrs. Vereker trusted they were not getting tea for her, for she would not take any.

"We have never been away before, and it was so hard to arrange everything alone," went on Eva, and the tail of her eye flashed contempt upon Milton, who, instead of helping her, had drawn Dennis aside and was talking hunting to him.

Mrs. Vereker's hard eyes travelled slowly round the little room, dwelling on the new chintzes, the photographs, the various attempts to beautify the unlovely squareness, and dwelling on them with a chill lack of appreciation. There were no "statees," towelled or otherwise, or pictures to impress her.

She smothered a manufactured yawn impressively.

"You have done it alone; but I presume that your mother will soon come to look after you?" said Mrs. Vereker heavily.

"Well—no. You see, she's dead," explained Eva. "We lived with our aunt," she added hastily.

"Indeed!" Mrs. Vereker, having herself made an awkward speech, was exceedingly angry with Eva.

"Indeed—your aunt," she said stiffly. "I suppose, then, she is coming to live with you?"

"She!—she can't," murmured Eva, wondering how people turned conversations.

"I consider it most negligent and wrong of her to leave you alone," observed the visitor.

"She!—she's dead too!" said Eva weakly. And

a sudden splutter of laughter from near the serge curtains was too plainly audible.

The stiffening of Mrs. Vereker's neck made the knave of hearts bow jauntily. She turned to Captain Milton, who now came up, entering into a pleasant conversation with him about various social events and happenings, completely ignoring her girl hostess—so that Eva had the sensation of being a new Alexander Mactavish, mentally whipped and put upon the cold doorstep to cool in her own house.

She was quite alive to her visitor's importance, and over-anxious to please her. It would mean so much to them to be taken up by the right people in this strange place. She commenced to talk to Dennis, and tell him of their plans and hopes, receiving from him a grave assurance that Gog was certainly up to any weight, and a gentle, well-mannered horse.

"Of course, he might be a little—slow," said Dennis diffidently, wondering what plough the great beast had come from.

Biddy, tray in hand, banged upon the door, arranging it with great dissatisfaction on its bed of three carved legs. Moira, carrying the pot and a dish of hot cakes, followed.

"Temptin' providence an' the new chaney!" grumbled Biddy, bending her snowily capped old head as the brass tray rocked and the cups clattered. "Miss Eva, will ye get the gintleman to put his hand to the legs, while I lays it down? Now, isn't a nice clane cloth led down on a firum table far better than thim childther's nonsense? 'Twould

take but a kick of yer feet to sind all that over. The ould ways is the besht, don't ye think so now, ma'am?"

With the freedom brought by many friendships at Borrisdeane, she appealed to Mrs. Vereker as she would have to Mrs. Butler or Madam O'Neill.

Mrs. Vereker gasped and stared, ignoring the question.

"Wouldn't ye say so, ma'am?" repeated Biddy, lighting the spirit lamp, then, again receiving no answer, looked at Mrs. Vereker with a pitying scrutiny. "Sphake up to her, Miss Moira, dear, the poor lady's as deaf as Mikey Guinane's ould mother," observed Biddy as she left.

Eva, growing rapidly hysterical from strain, dispensed tea, Mrs. Vereker taking some mechanically, her handsome grey eyes glaring at the door which had shut out Biddy. To have the chillness of dignity taken for deafness is not pleasing.

Dennis, helping assiduously, could not take his eyes from Eva's pretty face. He had escaped from Milton, and was endeavouring to counteract his mother's manner. It had taken him two hours' hard coaxing, and a heavily painted picture of her unkindness to two timid girls, to get her to come to call. They had been in Ballydare in the morning, she declared, in actresses' hats and absurd gowns. They were three young adventuresses come down to hunt many things. Dennis, lying cheerily, was certain they had an aunt or a mother. He represented the enormous benefit which his mother's call could confer, and with so little trouble to herself. With a tongue oiled by the memory of the sheep hunt, and

Eva Considine's sweetness as she lashed her mighty steed across corners and up lanes to cut the flock off and help him, Dennis had triumphed. Now, with the horror of the knave of hearts, who grew positively skittish in his mother's hat, and the memory of the noise which had greeted them, he dreaded his drive home.

Listening to Eva's gentle voice, it was impossible to doubt her breeding, even with a rose nodding over her ear, and the room littered with fallen odds and ends. Moira chattered more merrily, trying to cover her discomfiture; she flitted, waiting on every one, especially on Milton, who made a heavy tea and allowed Dennis and Mr. Stanley, in the moments when he appeared from behind the curtain, to hand things about.

Mrs. Vereker, warmed by excellent tea, and comforted by Biddy's hot cakes, thawed slightly. She impressed upon Eva the desirability of a chaperon: failing those who were dead, they could easily find some one alive, some needy gentlewoman requiring a home. Eva, anxious to propitiate, promised to think of it, and glared reproachfully at her sister when that young lady suggested the coal cellar as the only spare bedroom.

"Also"—Mrs. Vereker took a second cup of tea and more cake, remarking that really those curious old Irish servants did understand how to make hot bread—"also, Miss Considine, I observed you yesterday speaking to Matthew Malone. No doubt he will try to sell you a horse. He is"—Mrs. Vereker's voice deepened—"a person of the lowest stamp, a cheat, a rogue. I was obliged to take my land from him,

and I believe he would poison the covert if he did not live by horse dealing. Do not look at his horses."

Hoofs clattered outside. "Moira! Eva!" cried Kathleen's voice, shrill with excitement. "I've bought it—bought the cob. I jumped it everywhere, and had tea with Malone, and there never was such a darling, and I've called it Jim Crow, and he's ridden back with me, and you must write the cheque and give him some whisky now, and Patsy will put him in the stable and feed him."

Kathleen, her face all aglow, came into the circle of light. By her side, smiling happily, stood Mr. James Malone.

"The divil a fear he'll ivir fall with her," he said. "Anyhow"—then his eye lighted on his arch enemy, Mrs. Vereker, who had put down her cup, and, with disgust written on her face, had begun to fasten her sables.

Kathleen cried to Biddy for whisky speedily. "For Malone says a dry bargain is no bargain, and that's why The Star had sidebones and fell into the ditches. Gog's man did have porter, and—here you are, Malone."

Perched upon the sill, brushing Mrs. Vereker's skirts as that lady endeavoured to leave, Kathleen filled a brimming glass, and without a cough Malone swallowed it. "Here's good luck and success," he said, "to all good people, and the divil's luck to him that deserves it." His smile was angelic in its innocence, but his eyes were not far from Mrs. Vereker as she made her haughty adieux, with a distinct show of temper in her flushed cheeks.

"I am glad to have had the opportunity of apologising for any hastiness concerning my sheep," she said coldly.

Eva, visibly unhappy, said she was so glad they were in. Mrs. Vereker, in tones of doom, said that they had known that at the gate. Her arrangement of her veil failed to disturb the knave of hearts, who kept his place with determination. Eva's flowers had slipped off, and Moira, as she said good-bye, trembled for their one pack of cards.

"I am so sorry ; it was my fault for throwing them. But may I?"—she lifted the little knave from his throne—"we haven't got another pack, you see," she apologised.

"Have I," demanded Mrs. Vereker, "been carrying that thing in my hat all the afternoon?"

Her son, whom she questioned, said it was so.

The splutters of laughter and smiling glances were explained. With a depth of bitter resentment which rent her, Mrs. Vereker made her exit, pushing past Mat Malone, who still stood at the widow; marching to her car in deadly silence. The Considines had made an enemy who had much in her power.

As the powerful car throbbed into life, she spoke fervently, furiously, pouring out the vials of her wrath upon the three Miss Considines, who, divided between chagrin and merriment, had dispatched their other callers, and with none left but Mat Malone, who was helping Patsy, sat laughing hysterically in their little room.

"We are fated, fated," groaned Eva. "Our first visitor, all mixed up with bridge, romping, and cigarettes, and a shower of cards."

"And the knave of hearts," muttered Moira helplessly.

"And Mat Malone, and the whisky. Eva, do you think she will ever forgive us? And Kathleen"—Moira suddenly awoke to deeper things—"this cob is only a screw, a thing we shall never make any money of. It's not fair of Kathleen."

Eva made excuses on the ground of youth, as Mat Malone returned for his cheque, and to say the cob was "nate and comfortable; but did they know the grey mare was the least sign of windsucker, an' that was what kep' her so poor?"

Moira groaned.

"An' that bhoy of yer's has the horses fair smothered in straw," added Malone, as he took his cheque. It was for thirty pounds, and represented nearly twice the value of the cob. "Faix, 'tis aisy known he doesn't pay for the same."

This was direct fruit of new teaching.

Moira, crouched over the fire, was thinking of James Dunne's story. What a beautiful creature this woman, so handsome still, must have been as a young girl, when the hair shone with the lights which dye now hid, when those cheeks had been flushed and soft, and the perfectly cut mouth red. Who, she wondered, had broken his heart for her, and where had she seen some one like Mrs. Vereker before? She could not remember, but she knew that the face struck some note in her memory. Young brains run riot. In fancy she pictured the scene out hunting; the furious, bitter words spoken by a boy whose whole being quivered with suffering and furious anger. To be flung aside for an old white-bearded man; to see the

girl he had loved sell herself as coolly as a Circassian slave. To be pointed at, mocked, pitied, the hardest thing youth can endure. What words, she wondered, had he flung in the beautiful face which turned away and mocked him with a careless laugh, caring nothing now that she could be rich? Had it satisfied her? Were pictures, diamonds; cunning chiselled marble full recompense for the loss of the love a young man can offer? Did they repay for perjured faith and broken promises? Moira could not tear the picture from her mind; it haunted her, and more so because the impression of having seen Mrs. Vereker before jarred on an unresponsive memory. Now, Dennis Vereker—his name made her thoughts pass on—was very rich. He had seen Eva, called next day—surely a good first chapter for the romance she desired to write on life's pages. If through this scheme of hers Eva should make a great match, be rich and happy, what would they say to her then? She would have proved herself right, be repaid for all the arguments used to induce her sisters to consent. The Hermit—even the Hermit could not look at her again with faintly mocking eyes, as he had done before they parted. He had spoken of knowing Ballydare; she must ask about him, see if people remembered Oliver Tremayne. Moira's romance went swiftly. She saw Eva all in white, aflash with diamonds, going to her wedding; she decided on the bridesmaids' dresses and presents; travelling farther, she saw herself staying at Knock Castle, with Mrs. Vereker somewhere out of the way, and Eva, clad in wondrous attire, proud mistress of the lovely rooms. She was going in to a dinner party of twenty, with

unheard-of luxuries before them, when Biddy put her head in, and observed that if Miss Moira didn't "hurry to dhress, the rabbit'd be rags and the bacon boiled away."

It was a faint change from her dreams, but, being hungry, she went quickly.

CHAPTER VII

THE FIRST MEET

THE first meet of the season. What memories it calls up; what hopes rise as we read the fixture on the card! Summer is over, grim winter has come; the greatest sport in life lies for five months before us. Will luck, a fickle jade, be ours this year, or, with a mocking grin, will she see us take the wrong side as they break; find the gate in a hopeless fence locked; or having sent us flying to that easy place which once crossed will take us to hounds, see the cold trail of barbed wire winding tightly across it? This year the funkers think they will funk no more, but sit down and ride that first big place which up to now has sent them round, primed with excuses. They will do at last what all their lives they've meant to—take their own line and sail away on terms with the flying pack: no following like flocks of sheep, hard on each other's tracks, in one broken-down spot; no waiting until the once stiff wall is a grey and rattling ruin. Good men and true, who know no fear, smile softly as hounds come trotting in and gather on the lawn. There is a chatter of foxes and horses, and scent and fences, and not a sad face among the crowd. How the underbred horses hump their backs and buck

and squeal as they do their first canter; the well-bred ones munch at their bits and go demurely, keeping themselves ready for the gallop they long for. For horses like it as much as their masters; it is as keen joy to them to stretch their powerful limbs, to jump truly and strain their generous hearts to keep near the pack they love. There goes an old bay, stiff in the shoulder, fired for curbs, bandaged all round; but how he cocks his ears and steps out, how the rheumatism vanishes as he grows warm! and no five-year-old will go as keenly as the old veteran of eight seasons who was bought for twenty pounds. What a feeling that bad things are left behind and all good things lie in front as the first whimper, the first long yowl for fox, which is no puppies' babble, rises from the gorse. Reins are tightened and hats jammed down, and the good horse beneath us shivers with expectation. Which way will he break? Back over the rough country, or to the east, over the valley with its line of perfect banks? A shout. He has gone over the banks, and the thunder of squelching hoofs sounds down the long hillside. Swing now right or left and get your start away from the crowd. With its sorrows and its triumphs, its poor days and perfect, hunting is with us again, and the joy of being alive to enjoy it is ours.

At The Beeches the three girls were astir early; there was rushing from room to room, hasty snatching of mouthfuls of breakfast, consultations as to the adjustment of the new habits, grievous failures concerning ties, and a strong disposition to puff out their hair beneath their new silk hats. Eva liked a veil, Moira did not; then, too abundant locks wobbled

perilously. And all the flurry of preparation was punctuated by shrill and unceasing remarks from Patsy as he bustled to and fro with saddles and bridles.

"Divil a pick of corn is The Sthar afther atin' for me. Sonce a taste. She just damped it with her breath, becos there was a brush laid on to clane her before she began to ate."

A pause, and then a wailing grumble that he had the new girths "squez" to the last hole, and even then he was afraid the saddle would come round.

He appeared and disappeared at the stable door, scarlet-faced from anxiety; a further shriek from Gog's stable proclaimed that "the schamer had got his muzzle off and finished his bed till he was puffed out like a crass turkey cock." Jim Crow alone came in for no comments, having licked his manger clean of oats, and nothing further, save his modest allowance of hay.

There was a lull, while the three pranced for the last time before their respective looking-glasses, and Biddy was ordered to see that Eva's sandwich-case was on the saddle. The altercation drifted clearly through the open windows at the back.

"Patsy!" and Patsy appeared. "Have ye Miss Eva's sandwich-case above on the horse?" cried Biddy. "Have ye, Patsy?"

"I have not," said Patsy, disappearing; then, stung to retort by the storm of contempt which swept at him across the yard, he appeared again.

"But I have it on the saddle," he observed gloomily taking over the silver lining to be filled.

He had scarcely applied himself to polishing The Star's hoofs when Biddy's shrill old voice roused him once more.

"Patsy! Patsy! Come out till I see you. Patsee!"

Patsy, wishing politely that "the divil had Biddy's tongue for his brekhusht," darted into view, brush in hand, and rubbing his leg with some feeling.

"Miss Kathleen wants to know if ye have her little cane that she left out yestherday? an' she'll be fit to be tied if ye haven't," said Biddy.

Patsy, with a worried look, said "the brains in his head were med soup of from thinkin', an indade if he'd known all the sandwichers an' sthicks an' nonsenses that wint with hunting, he'd have sthopped carin' the Murphy's jennit, aisy an' respectable.

"When I heard ye bawling, I did but take one eye off The Sthar," he said bitterly, "an' she druv me knee to the hayrack with the kick she med on me."

Here he fetched the sandwiches, ate one absently, and limped back to his charges.

When at last the three emerged in the glory of shining hats and boots and tight-waisted coats, Patsy murmured "glory" fervently.

"There'll be none like ye in the field," he said, with a groom's true pride in his own property. "Indade, Miss Moira, ye're for all the world like the gran' picthures of the circus in the town." The compliment was received with reserve and a request for the horses.

Patsy had not spared himself. The horses' coats

shone, the bits were silver bright, the saddles polished to glassiness. Moira, as she mounted, first looked back along The Star's lean length, and wondered if the world held so beautiful an animal. Gog took the opportunity to stretch out and bury his head in the rain-water barrel, as a protest against his abridged morning drink, and was removed with his great nose dripping.

"Sorra the far he'll go for ye, Miss Eva, betune wather an' sthraw," said Patsy contritely, as they rode away. He had announced his intention of following upon a "borryed" bicycle to see the meet.

They clattered down the road, beaming with joy, wondering what it would be like. The time so long anticipated had come at last. The magical hour when they were to witch Ballydare, and lay the foundation of selling their horses.

Moira was not over sure of bringing The Star home. "It's unlucky to ride them once they're sold," she said impressively. "And I'm sure when the Master sees her, he'll want to buy her at once. We must remember to get quickly away behind the hounds. It's no use riding to sell in the background."

Eva thought of Gog's morning meal and sighed.

Led horses and traps and men hacking on were already pouring along the road. Curious eyes were turned upon them, and sometimes turned away to smile. And at every horse and trap The Star kicked viciously, lashing out with her long legs as one who meant to do business. The grave sin of owning a kicker did not impress itself upon Moira. She bore

gently on the curb, and called her mare a playful pet.

At the fifth kick, The Star having narrowly escaped braining an elderly gentleman, who came close by, he pulled up with a hurt expression.

"You should wear a red ribbon, young lady, wear a red ribbon," he grunted noisily. "You very nearly caught me."

Moira, blushing at the liberty of the remark, and wondering where on earth the red ribbon should be adjusted, replied frigidly that it was only her mare's play. "She has never been out hunting," she explained; "never saw hounds."

"I'm afraid some hounds will wish they'd never seen her," he smiled now and grew genial. "Nothing so dangerous as a kicker. Keep out of the crowd or you'll get abused." He jogged on stolidly.

A few minutes later they arrived at the meet.

The hounds were coming up as they came, a cluster of pied bodies, and keen, wistful faces, moving with the easy hound jog which covers the ground so fast. They were drawn up on the lawn by Killeen House. A faint sun brightened the morning, touching light grey clouds to whiteness against a pale blue sky. A west wind sang through the still leafy trees, rustling their mantle of russet and gold and crimson to the cold earth, hurling the leaves as they fell to a rustling dance of death. Pink coats shone in the sunshine, dotting the stretch of grass; men and women were getting from traps and motors; grooms gave the last unneeded polish as they brought their horses up. It was all bustle and brightness; clatter of tongues and exchange of cheery greetings, and the Considines

gazed on it with awe-struck eyes. So this was a meet. This was the commencement of the fox-hunting, which they had read and dreamt about for so long.

The Star humped her long back and plunged heavily. Gog cocked his ears, and having said "Hu-hu!" heartily, thought better of further movement, and ate grass. Little Jim Crow, his lean, well-bred head carried high, only watched the hounds. A week's grooming had made his coat shine, a liberal supply of oats had filled him out. Highly blemished little beast as he was, he looked a hunter.

They were isolated strangers among the friendly groups, but that, Moira said, would not last long Even then the constant glances showered on them meant recognition, and the triumph would soon begin.

Mrs. Vereker's motor drew up near them, and they saw their only visitor getting on to a magnificent weight-carrying bay, almost thoroughbred, and with a mouth of silk. They were recognised with the chilliest of nods, and an audible request to Dennis to keep near his mother, as she feared her horse was fresh.

"Eva, the Master!" The lean little man they had seen in the town, now seeming one with a dark brown thoroughbred mare. He swayed to each movement with that perfect sympathy which marks a true horseman. On the ground he was insignificant, shuffling and limping from bad injuries, his hard bitten face like tanned leather. Riding, one had to turn and look as he swung past.

"He'd simply look perfect on The Star." Moira eyed Gog with a look of pity. "You see he goes in for thoroughbreds. But there are sure to be a lot of fat men, Eva," she added kindly. "I think I'll just let him see her."

Moira cantered The Star along up towards the hounds. She was just in time to see them welcome Donough Moroney as he came among them—a chorus of frantic joy which sent the nervous Star halfway round the field. By judicious use of the "crub" Moira got her back again, and rode over close to the waiting pack.

"Doesn't kick hounds, I hope?" Morency raised his head and grinned faintly. He remembered the mutton chops.

"Oh, no!" said Moira; and The Star, with a squeal of wrath, swung round and let drive at a straggler.

"Take her away and beat her," said Moroney kindly, controlling his peppery temper as he looked at Moira's distressed face. "But, please, take her away, and—put on a ribbon."

"Did you ever see such a disconnected brute in your life?" he remarked to Dennis Vereker, who rode up. "Some one stuck that child fairly. They're those new girls, aren't they, come down for the winter?"

Mrs. Vereker struck in with some chilling comments. "Most impossible young persons. No one belonging to them apparently but a dead aunt, with no real reason to give for coming here except, of course, the hunting," she added hastily.

The Master said, thoughtfully, that it was kind

of her to put that. He gave the signal to move on.

Clatter and jog and bump, as they poured through the narrow gate and turned into the road to Crin Gorse, always the first draw. Fresh horses squealed and plunged, and David Knox, who collected, did so in danger of his life. How The Star escaped breaking several horses' legs must always remain a mystery. There was a constant chorus of "Mind that brute!" until Moira was left alone upon the footpath with a space cleared behind her.

"The divil such a kicker ever I saw," announced Mat Malone, riding up wide on the left; "and ye out without a bit of red on her."

With the resource of his race, he took a horseshoe pin from his tie and directed Moira to stick it in the back of her coat—a process inducing some pain, as she twice got the point home before it was safely adjusted.

"'Twould be well for ye if ye were out of her," said Malone thoughtfully, "for she'll do a mischief yet, let alone that good oats is wasted on the likes of her. Kape to the wesht whin they break," he counselled, "for the other passage is very confined, and two old bridges across it."

They turned into a narrow lane, splashed squelching down it, and saw the covert lying low amid swampy land. It was cut across by a great drain, which one must cross to get out, and choose the half-rotten bridge described by Malone, or a scramble in and out of a muddy cattle-track, where horses slid and slipped as they breasted the ascent. Even once fairly away, the first few fields were almost a bog,

fenced by treacherous, crumbling ditches, full of sullen brown-hued water, and with but one passage over them.

"Let me sthay with ye, Miss Kathleen," said Malone, "an' I'll guide ye." He was riding a fretful half-broken grey; his bridle a rusty snaffle, the single reins darned together with bootlaces, his saddle was propped off the withers with a cotton pocket-handkerchief, and the rowelless spurs tied to his heels had never been fellows. But his hands played the youngster's mouth as he reached and yawed; his knees, in their patched breeches, were firm in their easy grip. A horse bought from Mat Malone was certain to possess manners and to face his fences. He could hustle a coward or a rogue into deeds of prowess, could steady a nervous rusher until the last moment, and make him hop out over a narrow bank with an easy change when the youngster had expected to fly.

As he stood by the girl's side, he kept a running *sotto voce* commentary on the hunting-field. "That sthout ould felly, that's David Knox, that knows better than a fox where he'd be going to. If ye want to go aisy and see a run's end, folly him. Him down there with the glasses, that's Andtherson, an' 'twould be well to see his heels an' hounds runnin'. Didn't he jump the government drain outside lasht year on that very bay mare? That's Misther Vereker; but shure ye know him, an' he rides well too. An' his mother there, the same; but she's that jealous she'd lay her tongue to ye if ye gets in front. 'Twas all through a big wall down by Dayly's, an' I too hurried to hould the gate, that she thrun me

out of me land. 'Come back, Malone,' says she; 'come back.' An', faix, I wouldn't. Thim two young Miss McCarthys; they're the gurrls to go. Begad! an' there was Lady Mary Knon, on the chestnut, and Sir Thomas Finch, the fat filly, with her—thryin' to marry her, they say, he havin' buried Lady Finch lasht sphring. Be jabers! they has it," he whispered suddenly.

A long-drawn whimper sounded close by: they could hear hounds as they crashed to it; another, and then another, until it swelled to a chorus and the undergrowth rang to the sound.

They were drawn up in the middle of the straggling gorse, on the wide space crossed by the drain. Brackens, gold and brown, edged the gorse bushes, growing high and rank in the wet ground; the fern leaves stirred, silence fell suddenly, and a little red creature stepped out just before them.

"A! Oh, it's a fox!" It was Moira, crying out in wild excitement. "Mat Malone—a fox! I saw a fox!"

"Havin' eyes, 'twould be hard for ye not to," rebuked Malone, with mild surprise. "Be aisy, Miss Moira. Sthop shriekin'."

"Stand still, please; keep quiet."

Out poured the hounds, spreading for a second; down went old Paragon's nose, up went his yelp of triumph; now Melody echoed it. They dashed across, swarming in and out of the ditch, and were lost in the thick gorse beyond.

"Stand still, please. Tom has viewed him back."

The rush for the passage was stayed. Horses

fretted and plunged against restraining bits. The Star celebrated the occasion by rearing twice, and then kicking hard into the gorse, which pricked her into surprised submission. Gog raised one ear, and took a fresh frond of bracken into his mouth.

What was it going to be like? The Considines knew nothing of what was before them. All the books of the world teach nothing when a novice is confronted by the unknown joys and terrors of a first hunt. It had sounded so easy far away. Now they shivered with a new nervousness; there were so many horses to be got through, wedged as they were in the crowd—so little room to get out down the narrow track. There was none of the simple sailing through flat fields which Moira had believed to compass fox-hunting, and which opinion, as was her way, she had deeply impressed upon her plastic sisters. "We can sit over jumps; we want no more: just to keep near the hounds, and not be afraid of any fence."

But when one was not allowed to follow hounds, but was obliged to stand huddled in a corner while the Master, a lean monarch on a brown mare, inclined his head to one side and listened to a diminishing chorus of yelps——

"He's back over the drain again. It's a cub, I think. Stay here, please. I'll give you a shout, if he's off the far side." Moroney slipped into the muddy depths, scrambled up the side, and disappeared down an opening.

"We shall be left behind—left behind," wailed Moira; and people turned to look at her, while Mat

Malone counselled her in low tones to restrain herself. There was a minute's tense waiting as the echoing chorus rose and fell, then a long, clear shout, and a subsequent quick toot-toot rung clearly on the horn. Now the subsequent experiences of the three who had never seen hounds must come separately, and the behaviour of The Star merits first place. As the crowd surged forward, she rose with a sailing bound, tore at her bits, and bolted; in and out of the great muddy drain, churning the water up as she slipped and struggled up the far side, clearing a wild way for herself, until she knocked three horses into a composite condition at the gate, while the reins, as they tore through Moira's striving fingers, seemed a mere unkind reminder of the inefficiency of bits.

Hounds, with a clear start, were streaming across the low, marshy land. The land was intersected by tiny drains, in which a horse might almost break his leg if not taken carefully; it was full of marshy, water-filled hollows; but The Star, nose in air, swept over it as a grey tornado, and, to do her justice, she could gallop. Moira had hideous visions of those little dark-mouthed drains; she bathed in clouds of silver spray as her mare dashed unheeding into the pools; and she saw the great drain gaping before her—wide, with crumbling edges, with a gleam of sullen, weed-grown waters, and of uncertain depth. The impetus of The Star's pace made her rocket across it like a pheasant, clearing it with a foot to spare; also, as she struggled in heavy ground beyond, she ceased to run away, and if Moira had not been blown she might have stopped her. Moira's spirits rose to

fever point, for, looking back, she could see the crowd of horses being ridden hard for a passage across the drain. She seemed to hear the rip of the great, much-dreamt-of cheque as it was torn from the block; look at the signature of Donough Moroney written at the end. For she could see the velvet cap turned in her direction, and knew he was watching her. He undoubtedly was. A herd of lean calves, subsisting on the poor land, had crossed and foiled the line; hounds were dwelling, and in another moment Moira would be in the middle of them.

"That wonderful grey mare!" Moira, galloping on, glad of the spongy turf, which made The Star labour and pant, put the words into his mouth.

"That great long-backed camel has bolted with the girl," was what the Master said to old Knox, whose powerful horse could keep pace in the dirt with the little brown mare. "She's riding slap through the bog as if it was over a croquet lawn. And if she was drowned it would stop a nice hunt," he added gloomily. "There! I knew it."

Hounds threw up their heads, as the now frightened calves lumped off to higher land. They spread far out, with noses to earth, knowing that they must help themselves unless assistance was absolutely necessary. The Star, who had been straining every nerve to reach them, galloped into their midst with a gasp of triumph, and then kicked at every one she could see, with good aim and all the vigour she could gather. Paragon fled with a sore side; Pansy roared in anguish at a kick on the nose; Ladybird sat down and wept over a bruised shoulder. The clamour was deafening, and Moira was not quite clear whether it

mattered or whether her prowess in being so near them made up for a few playful kicks.

The distant thunder, wafted on the breeze, enlightened her. She could not complain of lack of attention, for Moroney was standing up in his stirrups, and it was perhaps fortunate that distance rendered his flow of remonstrations indistinct. But the frantic waving of his arms explained his meaning, just as Moira had reached a spot where progress was bounded on the east and west by two gaping bog-holes, and on the north and south by the yelping pack. It is possible she might have tried to jump the bog-holes, and fulfilled Moroney's fears of stopping the hunt; but at that moment Paragon, who, having been kicked first, was now out of pain, hit it off. They swung left, away from the treacherous bog, with its deep cuts and piles of turf, away to higher land, running as hard as the Ballydare ladies' pack can run. Now Melody had it, now Pansy, then old Paragon led again, her lemon-and-white body clear of the rest as they drove ahead, bustling for blood. Now tongues were thrown, now they ran mute, on a red-hot up-wind scent. Moira's heart throbbed to it; the glory of fox-hunting, ignorant as she was, rioted in her blood. To her it was no appreciation of hounds, but the joy of the pace—The Star was not spared across the bog—the rush of the west wind on her heated face, the ripple of the mare's shoulders as they cut the air in front of her. What wonder that men swear by hunting, and, forsaking all other, cleave only unto that! And she —her foolish heart sang a pæan—was alone with the hounds. Moira had time to think this as she galloped, to roll the foretaste of congratulations on her tongue.

As they swung in a half-wide, their point a low, gorse-grown hill, they came to the field, who, having avoided the bog, were waiting for hounds to get by. From Crin Gorse to Knock Hill was an almost inevitable line. There was another passage to be raced for before one got into fair going; another of those bottomless drains to be avoided. Moira saw the race with contempt, and galloped for the drain. But The Star running away, and The Star exceedingly blown, were two. The mare had no intention of risking her just-won reputation; she swerved on the verge; there was a moment's sickening struggle and plop of turfy edges into cool depths, and the grey raced hard to join the other horses. The passage was a narrow one, with a stone gap fencing it, and they reached it just as the Master, followed by Knox and Anderson, were upon it. The Star resented their presence. With a rush she squeezed in and jumped, hurling the light-weight on to General Knox, and General Knox's heavy brown on to the Master, and sent that unsuspecting gentleman's mare on to her knees in a sea of dirt. As the three extricated themselves, and the Master (who had jumped off) dived for his stirrups, they turned their wrathful faces, and words seemed beyond them. Moroney, who seemed to have got past wrath, and to be praying a little, wrenched his bridle and slipped out right-handed. Mr. Anderson, who had come on his left side, did not pray, but seemed to want to be quite quiet and alone at the left to say what he wanted, and left fat old Knox, as he wiped half a pound of mud from his forehead and nose, to wrestle with the matter.

"She—she would come," said Moira unhappily.

The expression of the Master's back made her cheque seem farther off.

What General Knox said, indistinctly—for the mud had drifted to his mouth—was that if he owned a brute like that he'd shoot it. Then, being a kindly old man, he proffered some muddy and breathless advice concerning ill-broken beasts, the etiquette of hunting, and the absolute necessity of being able to stop a horse when one wanted to. "It's a shame to put a lady on such an animal," he gasped, as they stretched across the firmer land.

Moira, in shrill treble, explained The Star's inexperience and the purity of blood which made her foolish and impetuous. She would probably have proceeded to enumerate the whole pedigree in a shriek, for the wind tore her words away, but a low green bank loomed in front. General Knox's brown slipped over with an easy change, The Star treated it as a raised drain, and fell into the fortunately shallow trench at the far side. Moira, losing patience, hit her, for another bank was close in front. The blow and complete loss of wind soured the equine constellation. She flung out her fore legs sullenly, and declined to jump at all.

Horse after horse thundered up and hopped over, until the last tail of the spread-out field had passed, and still The Star, who had kicked impartially at anything she thought she could reach, remained where she was, snatching mouthfuls of grass in the intervals of plunging away from the stick. There is no task more hopeless or tiring than the tussle with an obstinate refuser. Moira rested from sheer exhaustion, and, as if to add to her misery, the hunt in full view swept

across the slope of the hill towards a long wood, having got their fox through the gorse with little delay. The hounds were specks now, running fast across the green fields, slipping over the distance-dwarfed fences. The man in pink on the long-tailed horse going beside them was the Master. How easily he took his fences; no flying or falling there. She thought she could distinguish General Knox—reflection brought a memory of a gleam of pleasure as he had turned his head to see The Star refusing. There was a woman close up, some one on a little horse. Could it be Kathleen on her worthless cob? Then a medley of horses and a glimpse of occasional falls; of distant riders turning away and looking for soft spots; of the inevitable sheep-like tail, jumping one by one behind the other. Then far behind these a lady coming fast and furiously, and yet two fields another lady alone, on a high brown horse. Moira stared. The lumpy stilted gallop; the majestic deliberation on the fences. This whipper-in of the hunt must be Eva on Gog. There were tears in Moira's eyes as she realised the sharp line drawn between the triumphs she had dreamt and the bitter reality of what had occurred. She, on The Star, had reached hounds, knocked down two members of the hunt, been left behind before them all. Eva was last of all.

The tale of Eva's experience was shorter and less varied. When she had wrenched Gog's head up from the bracken and started him, she had then borne away in the crowd to the wooden bridges and tried to cross, but Gog was a careful horse. He put his mighty feet upon the boards and snorted and stood still; he would not go; he could not back, for a furious crowd surged

at his docked tail. In vain a rain of whips fell upon his fat quarters: he, who had pulled six drunken men home from fairs and markets, thought little of whips. The crowd, recognising defeat, flew back the other way, but fate elected that Mrs. Vereker, who had been standing outside, and suffered from the flurry of a bad start, should gallop down for the bridge and find Eva in possession.

To pass was impossible. A hail of words more biting than blows were useless. "Back the brute, back him!" screamed Mrs. Vereker furiously, but Gog, hearing so much noise, would not back. He sniffed at the boards occasionally, absolutely declining to move.

Mrs. Vereker's temper was rent to fragments. She pounded Gog with a light and inefficient whip, shrieked until her voice went; she even tweaked and wrung his tail, and matters remained until even gentle Eva was forced to remonstrate.

"It's as bad for me as for you," she said tearfully.

Mrs. Vereker grew desperate. She essayed to pass with a rush, and there was just room for one. Gog sidled and turned, and both ladies were wedged fast in living nearness, while the bridge creaked ominously.

"Can't you even turn the great brute? Have you no idea of riding?" foamed the furious lady, who could have gone back, but would not.

"Shure, the bridge'll fall and let ye both out." Eva thought she had never heard a sweeter sound than Patsy's voice as he emerged from the bushes, his face flushed with enthusiasm. "I declare to

God ye can see the timbers bending." He took Gog by the bridle. "He has the mind of a Christian," he observed angrily, "an' the obstinacy of a Turk.

"Shure they're stampeding wesht outside away to the hills, going fasht, Miss Moira first away. Didn't The Star swheep the bog drain, an' out into the bog, and gallop into the middle of the hounds, no less? I think by their aisin' a few is like to be dead, but who'd miss a dog or two from that lot? Array, Borrisdeane for iver! He won't stir, Miss Eva." The gentle suggestion from Mrs. Vereker that he was a complete idiot, sharpened Patsy's wits. He loosed his hold, stepped back and, removing his cap, held it out invitingly with both hands. Gog thought of food, and abandoned his fears. He crossed the bridge, and Mrs. Vereker, with a last snort of rage, dashed away at a furious pace.

"Truly we seem ordained to offend her," murmured Eva as she laboured in pursuit.

Mrs. Vereker, blaming Eva for everything, was fated to do wrong. She essayed a short cut to the right, and found a closed gate just as the hounds swung left. Eva, who saw no other guide, followed her, and the pound, pound of the big horse's hoofs came just as the gate was open. Gog was slow, painfully slow, but he toiled diligently and never fell. Fast as Mrs. Vereker went, there was always something to prevent her shaking off the girl at her heels. First, having to come back from a wired fence, then, which proved wrong, taking a short cut advised by a countryman, and so on, until Moira saw them pursuing along the slope of the hill, with Eva now

two fields behind, and hounds in full swing a mile in front.

At this point The Star suddenly jumped and did not fall. A couple of gaps led to a lane winding along towards the wood; and, directed by friendly men, who all described the hunt with fervour, Moira reached the woods as hounds were coming out, having put the fox to ground in a rabbit burrow. Morency cast a sad eye upon the grey mare. It is possible that, had he known she was to sell, he would have bought her on the spot for the pleasure of never seeing her again. As it was, he merely muttered to himself, and shot out some icy directions to keep that kicker away while hounds got by.

Mrs. Vereker's glance as she passed was not lacking in expression. The episodes of sheep, cards, and wooden bridge had made her look upon the Considines as personal enemies; was inducing her now to let her sharp tongue run riot, and to endeavour to prevent any of the more kindly women from taking any notice of the strangers. Three pretty girls coming to a land full of marriageable daughters and sons were never likely to be welcome. Mrs. Vereker made up her mind the more swiftly as she saw Dennis riding with Eva, whom she had at last shaken off, that there would be something which was not quite the want of welcome; but a cold breath which should chill these little adventuresses to their hearts. And even with her son's too evident admiration, it was not Eva whom she objected to, but defiant Moira, with her grey eyes and her light-hued hair. Some fancy, strong enough to savour of some strange instinct, made her feeling towards Moira one of

absolutely active dislike, made her determine to leave no stone unturned which should injure the girl. The tale of Mrs. Vereker's call, with skilful handling, was made to assume gigantic proportions; riot and romping with strange young men; a familiar old farm-servant; farmers received in the drawing-room. The cold voice uttered the story until heads were nodded towards the Considines and shoulders shrugged.

"Oh, so good of you to tell me. Of course I shan't call on them. We don't want that class of thing done here, dear Mrs. Vereker."

So, as Moira, with the bitterness of failure chill upon her, jogged along the road, the evidence was summed up, and the verdict given. Ballydare did not mean to receive them. Then the red-headed girl, Miss Geoghan, they had seen in the town, was effusively anxious to talk, and, with her brother, sidled close at each opportunity; but Moira's moody face was not encouraging.

Dennis, on going up to Eva, inquired for his mother, whom he had missed. "Have you seen her?" he said.

Eva remarked drily that for a full half-hour she had seen no one else; and as Dennis was disposed to beam at this indication of friendship, she proceeded to explain.

"And it was not my fault, though your mother said it was," observed Eva sadly. "I don't think she'll ever forgive me or my horse."

Dennis, watching her pretty, despondent face, sighed deeply. He was a weak and indecisive young fellow, and completely ruled by his mother; but his plastic,

boyish fancy had received a deeper impression than he had ever yet known of.

"Was she very angry?" he said dolefully.

The closing up of Mr. Cornelius Geoghan on Eva's other side cut short the conversation. Cornelius, staring open-mouthed at pretty Eva, was palpably determined to talk, and to admire and praise effusively, even down to Gog's feet.

Moira was at this point joined by Captain Milton, strangely clean for a man who had ridden a hard hunt. He was reserved at first; but on hearing of her bad fortune, his pity loomed clear as a harvest moon. He gave her kind advice, too, as to the riding of the mare.

"A little handling, a little experience, would have brought her through the hunt," he said pleasantly. "Now, some day I'll ride her for you, and just show her what to do."

He then proceeeded to describe how he had been in first all through, and how splendidly he had seen it all. "Over a big country, too," said Captain Milton, "one that really wanted doing. Oh! I've seldom been nearer to them. Fact is"—he grew confidential —"I caught it once for pressing them just over the stream, where they checked."

Moira listened with unbounded admiration. "There was one enormous jump," said Milton, warming to his subject—"a bank, stone-faced, with bushes on the top. Nearly every one funked. It was just at the end, but I——"

Kathleen, pink with excitement, dashed Jim Crow between them.

"Oh, hasn't it been glorious? There is nothing

on earth like hunting. I followed Malone, and Jim Crow went so perfectly. Nothing seemed too big for him, and he galloped so fast. I'm the luckiest girl in the world," said Kathleen blithely. She looked at Milton with dawning pity. "I suppose you never picked them up after you stopped at the bank before the first road," she said. "Malone told me it was a dirty place entirely. Were you afraid your poor horse would not be able to get across?"

The violent empurpling of Lancelot Milton's face showed his appreciation of this sympathy.

"My horse refused," he said jerkily. "I came on at once."

"Oh, yes; I saw you turning up the road." Kathleen's brutal candour was quite devoid of intent to offend. "Malone said it was a hard, safe place. Lots of people galloped along it, but we never left the hounds. And poor Mrs. Vereker too"—the high-pitched, youthful voice carried back to a wrathful lady just behind—"I saw her miles and miles behind. I suppose there are lots of horses one could not ride over high fences?"

Captain Milton grunted sharply, and the hardest-riding lady of the Ballydare Hunt felt that her cup of injury was overflowing. She smote her good bay upon the shoulder, and the look in her eyes was not good to see.

The day wound to an unsuccessful close. A fat cub was killed and eaten in the Glynne woods. Another, a ringing brute, close pressed, got to ground at Banogue, and then dimness was chasing daylight from the sky, and it was time to go home.

The Considines were very tired and stiff. Knees ached from unaccustomed gripping of saddles, backs ached; they knew with sorrow that the waist measurements sent for the new habits had been prompted by vanity.

They rode homewards together—groups of people all round riding together, but they were alone. Milton, offended by Kathleen, had left Moira; they were friendless in a strange land.

They could hear the hunting talk, which never palls, all round them, as they rode silently, oppressed and weary.

The sky had cleared; there was a touch of frost in the calm air. Flushed with triumph, the sun sank, and, as lovers part, so the sky glowed with memory to his good-bye. High in the west a cloud poised, purple-bodied, crimson-fringed; through a tangle of leafy boughs they could see the river run red, as though with the world's blood. Thin mist rose; white wraiths about the lowlands, pointing chill, sluggish fingers towards the corner where their new home stood.

As they turned to reach the narrow bridge, which was their shortest way, Lancelot Milton's self-esteem became mended, and he stopped.

"Mrs. Hamilton," he introduced graciously. "She'll come to call on you if you won't shy cards at her head."

Moira dimpled pretty thanks. They were too glad of any caller.

"And I'll send the regiment by degrees." Milton spoke with assertive condescension. "Mustn't let you be lonely. Eh? Good-night.'

"Have you gathered"—Eva urged Gog to jog as they crossed the steep bridge—"that he—that man—was condescending to be kind to us?"

She dashed Gog on to Patsy and supper, and Biddy, as she plied them with tea, said that follyin' dogs was no work for young ladies. "Hadn't they faces on them like Mary Daly, that was took with a decline lasht May year?"

The two elder Miss Considines declined to be cheered.

CHAPTER VIII

RETURNING A CALL

"I WONDER," said Eva thoughtfully, as she came in to breakfast, "if any one ever means to call upon us here at all?"

She said it cheerfully, for a night's rest had brought reaction, and their sinking spirits had revived. After all, as Moira remarked, one could not expect, especially with four year olds, to succeed at first. Gog, though he was a little slow, had jumped perfectly. The Star had cleared a mighty drain. Kathleen's little cob had carried her close to hounds.

They discussed it all as the smoky fire lurked in wait for them, sending down its rolling volumes of pungent greyness when it thought they were not watching.

"Call, of course people will call," said Moira testily. "I am just going to write to the Hermit, to tell him what a success it all is, how I pounded the field and Eva——"

"Stuck on a bridge," said Eva thoughtfully. She could smile at the scene now. Absolutely sweet-natured herself, she could not understand another woman bearing malice for what was so palpably an accident.

"Tell the Hermit how I stopped the hard-riding lady," laughed Eva, "and how you knocked down three men and kicked the hounds, and how awfully nice all the Ballydare people have been to us."

"I can tell him about fat old General Knox and Dennis Vereker," said Moira, groaning as she stretched out an arm. "I can just show him how silly and stupid he was, and how he misjudged our horses."

"I wonder," said Eva slowly. "I wonder—I know—I wish he was here now," she added sharply.

Moira said nothing, but she wondered why she suddenly felt so cross and lonely.

A visit to the stables revealed The Star, a complete wreck, languidly partaking of flax-seed tea, and the mighty Gog moving stiffly on swollen limbs.

Patsy, polishing a bridle, appeared from the cupboard which he called the saddle-room.

"An' Gog," he said, "has the two foremosht legs swelled up like bolsthers, while The Star's that dead she wouldn't even pick her bed."

Inexperience could suggest no remedy for Gog's swollen limbs. Patsy thought 'twas what "they called a weed, but he took his oats," said the groom, "bether than that poor wisp of a grey that's so casht down she wouldn't even kick at ye."

Moira tried apples and carrots vainly. The descendant of Solon drooped her lean head and tottered upon her thin legs as if death were nigh her.

"Old Dunne says that class is apt to die in the night after a hard day," said Patsy cheerfully.

But his face was alight when, having reviewed all the equine ills, and told them Jim Crow didn't leave an oat, he fell to speaking of hunting.

"Niver in me life did I hope to see the like," he said. "With the red coats, an' all the shinin' fine horses, an' the great complement of dogs yelping an' schreechin' together. I was struck down in the furry bushes," he declaimed, "whin the fox pasht me out, an' I declare to God he thrun an eye on me sour as a Christian, may be thinkin' I'd bawl out. I could nearly run the smhell of him meself without ev' a dog. An' with that whin the young huntsman saw him, the tearin' an' the shovin', an' the mud risin' like rain from the ground, an' thin scramblin' at the gap an' out across the field, with the dogs mad on the trail, an' every felly beltin' his horse to kape up."

This was clearly a flight of fancy on Patsy's part.

"A' then didn't I see Miss Moira flighten out like a duck across the wather, and Miss Kathleen going quiet an' aisy but well out in front? Sure, I ran till the breath left me own body, an' thin whin I wint back for the bicycle didn't I find poor Miss Eva in hoults with the ould wan on the bridge? 'Twas the gran' day we left Borrisdeane to see its like, an' if ye plaze, Miss Eva, I'm wantin' a load of sthraw."

Eva, peering at the golden depths about the horses, timidly suggested waste.

On Patsy's retorting that he was but doin' what the soldier officer told him, she sighed and said no more. The keeping of horses was not a cheap amusement.

"An' himself that's the triminjus huntsman," remarked Patsy contemptuously. "I seen him. 'Wo-a—wo-a,' says he, at the first fince out of the bog. 'Wo-a,' says he. 'I can't howld the brute,' and he bearing on the reins as trustful as if they were stheel ropes. An' faix he wo-a-ed till the gap was level, and thin he wint out. I'm thinking he's a greater man in a sthable yard than he is outside." Patsy, who had spent several weary hours endeavouring to plait straw, was still resentful. Certain rolls which he called "soogawns" now decorated the edge of the horses' beds.

Moira took the dejected Star to eat grass, while Patsy led Gog round the little gravel sweep, observing with much anger as he went that "you could girth a saddle around thim legs," and Eva went to receive Biddy's directions as to housekeeping. The weekly cheques were swelling here, where everything had to be paid for, and there was no Strawberry to give milk, or little flocks of fat chickens and ducks in the back yard. Eva's face grew thoughtful over her bills, and Biddy, when it came to buying, was no economist. Mr. Dunne, now mending a back door, where he said there was a "blasht of air that'd turn a spit," was, as usual, remaining to dinner.

His ever sympathetic ears had already heard the tales of the chase. The drain which Moira jumped he averred to be a bottomless trap, and he received the story of Eva's blocking the bridge with a thoughtful air.

"Bitther an' black; bitther an' black," he said. "'Twould be bether for ye nivir to see a hunt than to cross her. I tell ye, Miss Eva and Miss Moira, I

think the bitterness of what she did to young Grattan long ago has sthuck within her heart. Oh, she's well known to be the wicked woman whin she's crossed. I used to work up at Knock reg'lar, doin' odd jobs there, and I gave her but one answer, tellin' her she med a mistake whin she told me to alther some boards I was puttin' up in an outhouse. 'Oh, you think that same, do ye?' says she. The nose on her shook at the sides an' went white, an' the eye she thrun on me'd have pierced iron. Not another word she said; but I got me due that night, an' was told to come no more—a great loss to me, for I was a dacent, hard-workin' by-e then, before me wife died an' I tuk to the dhrink." There was candour about old Dunne very hard to resist. His white-whiskered face was so kindly beneath its network of deep lines, the gleam in his watery blue eyes so full of humour; and now that Biddy fed him he drank but little.

As they rested aching limbs during an idle morning, the Considines decided that it was time to return their one call.

"Then if any one does come to see us we shall be out," said Moira viciously.

Old Dunne, on being consulted, knew a "frind" who had a fine "cyar" for hire, and was dispatched to fetch it.

The plumed hats and long dresses were again produced, Kathleen electing to stay at home in lazy comfort, and to send away the callers if they came.

The car of Dunne's friend was drawn by a raking roan horse, with a rope kicking-strap and a decided temper. After a few undecided plunges he started

affably, taking them along the Castle Crin road in a series of shying bucks.

Castle Knock was some six miles away, a gloomy grey pile facing a stretch of straight avenues. Conservatories, built by old Vereker to please his bride, lengthened the already over-long house. Belts of trees hemmed it in, and a mass of evergreen oaks, dully green, shaded each wing—so close, they dripped upon the grey walls. There was no brightness about it. Clipped yews, grim and dark, sheltered the lawn before the door. If no wind could blow upon it roughly, the sun could never shine fully, save on the upper storeys. The gate, guarded by great white monsters, was a gap in the belt of yews ; then, as one came to the door, there were other gaps cut here and there to give a glimpse of the sloping lawn.

Now Mrs. Vereker had a party : a select circle of friends to play bridge and drink tea. There was no gaiety at Castle Knock—the gleam of white marble watchers, the depth of the heavy carpet, the enervating heat of the hot-water pipes warming the house seemed to subdue the stranger who walked down the big corridor. One could not talk or laugh between that gleaming line, who poised their marble limbs in curves of chilly beauty. The butler's stately grey hairs would have risen at a too merry laugh, the great footman have turned and doubtless welcomed it. Stillness hung about the place, stillness and a constant gloom. Voices seemed to echo in the long drawing-room ; unconsciously tones fell, and faces stiffened, as they passed between the white-and-gold doors. The splendid hangings were neutral and colourless, the Wilton-pile carpet spread drably dull

against a white paper. The chairs seemed to find cause for offence in being sat on, so chilly was the expression of their satin coverings. Long mirrors gleamed against the wall; Dutch pictures, exquisite but lifeless, were hung upon them; and the gleam of white marble shone wherever a statue could stand. The haughty, handsome owner of the place made them her hobby, loving the delicacy of their limbs, living, with some strange note of sympathy or envy, the semblance of life which could feel no pain nor joy.

Except Dennis's den, an untidy mass of guns, and rods, and books, there was no room in the huge house where one could feel at home. The vastness of the dining-room closed upon one as a pall. Silence again here—footsteps drowned in Turkey carpet, noiseless flitting of servants, food coming unheard from behind a screen. A tinkling glass, the undue clatter of knife and fork seemed an indiscretion. There were statues here also, but fewer; and dark Rembrandts, and steel-clad cavaliers, and grey landscapes hung against a dull red wall. The very sunshine peered in timidly, through screen of silken blind and heavy curtains; peered and slipped away again, glad to leave the serving of warmth to servile coal. There were large dinners at Knock, sent up by a *chef* of note, the hostess ablaze with jewels, facing her son, talking pleasantly, flinging the ball of conversation deftly from guest to guest. Yet even dry champagne, and vintage port, and quails, and plovers' eggs have never made a dinner there a merry one. Voices sank, obscured by the brooding stillness; after dinner the men left good stories untold, and discussed crops and

politics, while the ladies sat about in the big drawing-room and were chilled, despite the heated atmosphere, and depressed, despite the glow of white-shaded electric lights. There was no pleasant, irresponsive gossip among them of dress or light flirtation, or the ever-fruitful topic of a servant.

If there was a reputation to be discussed and torn to shreds, that would wake Mrs. Vereker into swift attention ; but the Ballydare women, living as they did in the open air, were more inclined to find excuses than to whisper those pungent " I hears " which have done so much evil in the world. So, as they sat they talked laboriously, and murmured fervent thanksgiving when the evening was over. To stay was even more depressing ; one came seriously to breakfast along the long corridors, slipping past those rows of silent watchers to the dull stateliness of the dining-room, and took to cold food because it seemed almost daring to eat eggs and bacon in the sunless quiet.

Mrs. Vereker, who did nothing by halves, had given a description of the Considine girls, followed by strict orders as to their non-admittance when they returned her call. Two bridge tables were set, for the six guests had arrived ; she awaited two others, and fate ordained that as one of these, Miss Martin, a snub-nosed, haughty little maiden, alighted, the roan horse, snorting proudly, dashed the Considines to the door.

The driver, remarking proudly that "the sthring he had the trace tied with was dam good," flew to the animal's head, and Eva and Moira, be-plumed and all a-rustle, ran up the steps. Miss Martin was being admitted. Their social training was not an extensive one, and ere the footman could say anything they

went in, telling him to announce the Miss Considines. They had heard Miss Martin make the ordinary stereotyped inquiry, and knew Mrs. Vereker was at home. The butler to whom they were handed on was a polite man, and accepted his future certain reproof with a sigh. The hush of the corridor fell on the two as they followed him ; they stared at the line of white figures, looked down at the thick carpet. There were no rich people at Borrisdeane ; this waft of heated air, the silent servants, was a new experience. As Moira said afterwards, money seemed to walk with you and tweak your nose as you went, which was expressive if not elegant.

" How late you all are ! " Mrs. Vereker, handsome in deep mauve velvet, diamonds glittering in her laces, turned her head from the table, then put her cards down and froze in sudden horror.

" We thought we should be too early if we came any sooner ; but of course the roan horse galloped a great deal," said Moira. " How d'ye do ? "

Mrs. Vereker rose slowly. She held her hand out, and the silence of the room was something tangible.

The Considines were conscious of distant scrutiny from curious and unfriendly eyes, so much so that Eva, immediately feeling if her hat was straight, pulled it rakishly over one ear. Mrs. Vereker, sitting down again, made no further remark ; she did not introduce the girls to any one. Now, if they had been of the world they aspired to know, these two would have apologised for interrupting a bridge party, and have left again in five minutes, for a further arrival completed the eight and a new table was made

up. Unfortunately they did not know, so Moira, saying, "Please don't think of us, we'd love to watch," plumped down upon the wide arm of a brocaded chair, and sat staring at the hand of a fat and nervous woman, who came out meekly, prepared to lose.

A hand was dealt and played. Mrs. Vereker's rings flashed rays into the shadows as she drummed upon the table, watching her partner struggle with a delicate no trumper. In the shaded light, with her black hair puffed about her face, the lace about her throat softening the hard lines, she looked young and very handsome. Moira forgot the cards as she watched her, and sought still for the puzzling lost note of memory. Why should she think she had seen Mrs. Vereker before? James Dunne's story rose before her. Had the other man who had lost this brilliant woman broken his sore heart for her? Had the diamonds, the cold magnificence of the house, repaid the girl for her treachery to her young lover? Was there some soft spot in the hard nature which throbbed still for what she had given up: strong arms, warm love, hot adoration replaced by an old man's slavish worship, an old man's petulant whims? It interested Moira strangely, and seemed in some inexplicable way to touch her own life, and be woven in the web of her fate.

She woke suddenly to watch the play, the light fall of the cards, the intent, anxious faces, the hover of fingers over dummy ere they took a discard from it. The plump lady, a Mrs. Haviland, wife to a major in the regiment, had played with her husband and had absolutely won a game.

"You've brought me luck," she beamed at Moira. "I've never held such cards."

"I must bring you more—a hundred aces." Moira glanced at her hostess's face, now alight with active annoyance. She was telling her partner how completely the loss of the game had been due to his not returning a diamond, and on his replying mildly that he had not got one, seemed to regard this want as entirely his fault. Moira's eyes twinkled. She bent to see Mrs. Haviland's hand, as that lady was going over and over and over it with bewildered and almost pained expression. Having failed to see one of her cards vanish, she declared no trumps with a sudden burst of triumph, and holding the prophesied hundred aces made the little slam.

"I am improving, aren't I?" she babbled. "Oh, Jack, I never win as a rule."

Her hostess, sourly adding the score, made some *sotto voce* remarks which appeared to relate to shelling peas.

And Mrs. Haviland, merely catching the last word, said it was marvellous having any this time of year.

Mrs. Vereker gulped, caught Moira's twinkling eyes and lost her temper. Abandoning metaphor, she became openly sarcastic, and only wondered that Mrs. Haviland had failed to make grand slam of it.

"We'll change chairs, I think," she said, as she cut an ace and took the deal.

"Then, please, come on mine, Miss Considine. You're my mascot. What's that, Mrs. Vereker? You hate people watching? I like it."

The fat lady's luck was not to be ousted by any

change of chair. She won, and chuckled, and won again : while Mrs. Vereker, who always hated losing, grew positively thunderous.

Tea, laid upon a large table, was brought in by an array of footmen. There was no cosiness about the meal at Castle Knock. The glow of the silver-gilt service, the display of iced cakes, the chilliness of the fragile, pure white cups seemed to tone with the cold, wide room. A marble falconer, graceful and alert, poised just by the table, as though he waited for a meal. Footmen carried cups and handed the elaborate cakes and golden dishes full of fresh sweets. But the tea loosed no chatter of bright tongues ; the bridge players talked in the low tones all voices fell to in this room ; lights glowed on the baize tables ; but the vast corners were full of shadows, shadows filled with the cold gleam of white marble. Here a hand thrust out, caught by a ray of light ; here a stony, sightless face, sadly beautiful. Again a whole form, pale and ghostly, against the grey dimness. It would not have surprised Moira to see one come softly out and stand amongst the living. She shook the feeling off, forcing herself to talk. Eva was faintly included in the conversation at the other table.

" Oh, it is wonderful, your bridge," said Moira. " How you count cards, seem by some mysterious rules to see the leads. . . . I have only played once. The afternoon," she added contritely, nodding at Mrs. Vereker, " when you came to see us, and I threw the cards over you."

" You were playing exceedingly noisily," said that lady, in tones of ice.

"Oh, so would you if Captain Milton called you a juggins. You'd have thrown the pack at him yourself."

Major Haviland's complexion appeared to suggest sudden apoplexy, and he fled for more tea. Mrs. Vereker's partner, General Knox, said, "Dearie, dearie me," very thoughtfully, and Moira, not catching her hostess's eye, rattled on:

"They went all over you, those cards. I was so sorry. It was nearly as bad as letting out your sheep. You know we seem fated to annoy Mrs. Vereker," she said, smiling.

"You . . . do, . . ." said Mrs. Vereker quickly. "In that, Miss Considine, I agree with you."

A sprawling V in diamonds flashed among the laces at her throat; it caught Moira's eye, striking that lost note of memory. Mrs. Vereker, with the light at her back, looked splendidly handsome.

"I cannot think"—Moira stared hard at her—"where I have seen you—what you remind me of."

"I have never seen you," said her hostess coldly. Yet her eyes stared back at Moira, wondering why the girl's bright face should rouse her to senseless, overwhelming dislike.

"Yet you remind me of something. You have from the first. You see, one would not forget you," said Moira, with simple admiration—"no one could."

"You think so?" A sudden gleam of feeling crossed the cold face. Mrs. Vereker bent over the cards. Was she thinking, Moira wondered, of the boy she had sent away? Perhaps she would send for him now, and ask him to share the riches she had broken his life up for.

"Oh, and I meant to ask you. Do any of you remember the Hermit—Oliver Tremayne, his name is?" Mrs. Vereker looked up sharply at the name —and again the V flashed. "He hunted here years and years ago, and wants to know about every one."

General Knox shook his head. "I remember Noll——" he said, and then stopped suddenly, looking at his hostess, who had faded into unconcern.

"He's—oh—quite old," said Moira. "Tall and fair, and very quiet. He said he knew Ballydare."

"I knew no Oliver Tremayne," said old Knox, but he spoke slowly and with thought—"though I remember a fellow of that description."

"Shall we play again?" The cold mask was down again, and Mrs. Vereker's momentary emotion was gone.

The butler, advancing noiselessly, crossed the dim room to his mistress's side.

"The Miss Considines' car man has desired me to say that the roan horse won't wait another minute without smashing the car, madam," he said solemnly; "and one trace, he says, is only tied with string."

Moira bounded to her feet. "Come, Eva. Goodbye, Mrs. Vereker; I have enjoyed myself watching the bridge, and we were so glad to have found you in."

Mrs. Vereker's face, as she held out limp fingers, testified her appreciation of this kindly remark.

Eva shook hands silently, and the two went down the length of the handsome room, past gleaming statues into grey shadows, and out into the silent corridor.

"The most impossible, impertinent, overdressed young persons." Mrs. Vereker drew a long breath of wrath.

"I——" Mrs. Knox came over. "I think they look nice. Perhaps they are only young and foolish. Why judge so harshly, Violet?"

Mrs. Vereker did not know. She could scarcely explain it to herself. Something had shaken her from her cold composure, and she was burning with a dull heat of temper.

A trampling of hoofs and crunching of gravel revealed the flighty presence of the roan at the door, a roar from his driver and a further trampling, and then a crash—that he had bolted.

"Oh, driver, driver, don't leave us *here*." The shrill wail of Eva's voice drove in through an open window.

"Wore out he is from the cold," said James Dunne's friend as he returned, "and the fall of the cyar med jelly of agin one of thim sthone images. Be damned to thim carved out things. 'Tis knocked anyway, and I snapped the hand of it with the sthep before it went over."

Mrs. Vereker stood up in helpless anger. The "image" which Dunne's friend objected to was one of four, wrought by a master hand, which she had paid a large sum for.

The bridge was broken up. Mrs. Knox moved to her husband's side, and stood at one of the windows with them.

"That Oliver she mentioned. He couldn't be, could he?" She jerked her head backwards.

"I wonder," said old Knox. "Just what I wondered. I remember no other Oliver."

A subsequent silence was broken by the lashing of a whip, and many groans from the roan's owner, and further sounds of breaking. Some four minutes later the butler returned.

"The Miss Considines' horse, madam, is standing quite still at the door, and the driver suggests it is quite possible that he may remain there all night. Thomas and Henry are beating him hard, but without avail."

There was a sudden scurry, a "Lor, a mussy" sent from a frightened English throat, and the roan departed, over the flower beds, into the gate, but still upon his homeward road, at a full gallop.

The night was soft and cool, yet friendly after the chill of the Verekers' house. The shadows of the hedges were not agleam with white statues; live things, donkeys, and goats, fled from their furious progress. Dim purple cloudlets shot across the sky; fingers against a carpet of pallid blue; the sob of coming rain moaned in the gentle wind.

"Eva, wasn't it magnificent?" Moira's busy brain was full of her match.

"I think I should freeze to death if I lived there," said Eva quietly. "Freeze, or go mad among those marble people."

"One could alter all that, if one lived there," said Moira, keeping her schemes to herself.

There had been some callers to-day. Biddy had what she called a deck of visitors' cards to show, two women and their husbands; several of the Midshires; a clergyman's card: they guiltily remembered they had not been to church. Kathleen, enjoying herself in seclusion, had seen no one. She had worn old

clothes, made cakes with Biddy. "It was just like," said Kathleen, "being at home again, with no fine clothes, and nothing but the lake and the Hermit. Oh, Moira, he's written to you; here's a letter."

A bulky letter, written in a clear firm hand. Moira opened it slowly. What had the Hermit to say to her, and why did his letter seem to jar the chord of memory which connected her with Mrs. Vereker? She shook her head. The Hermit had a great deal to say. He had apparently forgotten their last quarrel at the station. How were they? Why didn't they write and tell him their news? It was lonely now at Borrisdeane, and Lake Cottage looked well, but sad. Moira must write to tell him how they got on, who had called, if they were having their wonderful time, and if they ever regretted the lake and the hills, and a foolish old Hermit. If it failed, would she not let him know and let him help? Who said there were no great events at Borrisdeane? Mrs. Daly had gone to court to get paid for her injuries, standing up all the time because she said "sitting was still an impossibility. Worn out the way from lyin' whiniver she'd want to sit, her health break from it, to say nuthin' of Tom's health, for if, savin' yer presence, my lord, I turn off me side an' on to where I shouldn't, in my slape, I lets a schreech that lays terror on him. Sure he has a thrimblin' in his legs from narvousness, the craythur, as the docthor can certify." Further, that though Tom's "thrimblin's" were due to much whisky, and though the court was convulsed, and the Judge sent for feather pillows, Mrs. Daly got twenty pounds; and was seen half an hour afterwards driving home triumphantly, sitting firmly in the position which

nature intends. His old setter was dead, went on the Hermit: he missed her horribly. He wondered if Ballydare had changed much—he knew it of old—or if the people he had known were still there: General Knox, Donough Moroney, Mr. Willie O'Brien, Mrs. Vereker. There was a blot on the page. . . . Then he was, as ever, Oliver Tremayne.

If she could have written a long tale of realised success, Moira's answering letter might have been different; as it was, realising her need of pity, she resented its being offered. Her ready pen scratched across the paper, telling a tale of glory. Ballydare was lovely. They knew lots of people, were learning bridge, hoped there would soon be a dance. The hunting was too gloriously lovely. The Star had jumped a huge drain the first day, and Gog had gone faultlessly. They had never been so happy, and indeed—indeed, they did not regret dull old Borrisdeane. Mrs. Vereker; Moira's sense of humour triumphed over her desire for reserve. The episodes of their meetings with this county magnate were set forth in full; "And don't forget to-day," said Eva, as Moira read her letter out. "How we stayed too long, and you suggested Captain Milton calling her a juggins, and how the poor fat Major nearly had a fit." Moira suddenly perceiving her misdeeds, grinned and wrote this down. She wrote of the cold dim house, of the marble statues, and the cold handsome woman who seemed marble herself amongst them—wrote without dreaming of the interest with which her letter would be read, of the saddened face which would bend over it.

"I think she just hates us, and means to be horrid,"

finished up Moira ; "but if Eva marries her silly son it will be all right, and he's quite in love with her now."

Eva had taken off her plumed hat and was shaking the feathers thoughtfully. Somehow, she said, she did not think these hats were quite what one wanted here. "I felt to-day as I'd got a ball dress on to come to tea in," said Eva disconsolately. "There's no doubt about it, Moira, we are too fine."

CHAPTER IX

A TRIP TO THE SEA

THE horses languished, unfit to hunt, in their stables, but life—if life spelt laughter and romping and the constant calling of the Midshire regiment—descended upon The Beeches.

If the motors and carriages of the county did not wait at the gate, the little drawing-room was always full.

There was bridge, acquired quickly enough to play for money and lose; there was diabolo to romp with outside; there were teas to be provided daily, so much so that old Biddy, groaning, had to ask for help. One servant could not cope with the answering of doors and making of cakes. A maiden named Mary Kate, whose puffed hair and fly-away caps made Biddy sniff with horror, now ushered in guests in correctest fashion, and witched Patsy's heart until he almost neglected his horses.

And money, as money will, melted. Eva's gentle eyes pored over her account-book until she shut it with a snap of despair, and wrote cheques with a dogged recklessness. Tea alone did not suffice for bridge—one must have whisky-and-soda, and cigarettes for men to smoke, until the square little

room was a blue haze—and then tea was not enough when the officers' wives, who were friendly, asked the girls to dine or supper : they felt they must ask in return. The bridge craze grew upon them, or at least upon Moira and Eva—Kathleen was too wrapped up in Jim Crow to think of anything else—so that they sat up until one in the morning poring over declarations and play, spoiling their freshness by late hours, and learning to smoke themselves, though they failed to like it. Captain Milton was a man who found a home at each station that he went to : the Considines supplied the want at Ballydare. He could do as he chose there—the familiarity accepted as smartness—and drink whisky-and-soda instead of tea without reproof. Mr. Cromartin, a boy with a bald forehead and a noisy manner, and one or two others, found The Beeches equally comfortable. One could stay on to dine without the bother of changing, and be sure of something simple cooked by Biddy's cunning old hands. Beech Cottage echoed to noisy, foolish laughter, echoes which slipped away beyond the boundary wall and did the newcomers little good. One or two people, too, who came to call, broke in upon a room hazy with smoke, littered with cards, with long tumblers standing where tea-cups ought to have been, and the overdressed foolish girls believing it was all smartness, and as it should be.

They were taken out in the Havilands' motor sometimes, learning the joys of flying fast along the quiet roads, as the car ate the miles before it.

Oh, it was life ; and yet, when the noisy days were over, and aching heads ceased thinking of money lost

by stupid mistakes, there was an inner voice which said to Moira there was something wanting: something, part of quiet Borrisdeane, which was better than all the feverish gaiety they lived through here. The people who did not come, the simpler people, who were not smart, were the friends they had been accustomed to. To be good form, perhaps, was not everything. Dennis Vereker, who came to see them more than once, was strangely quiet during the shouts of chaff and laughter. He used to talk to Eva when bridge ceased with an abstracted look upon his red face, as if he wanted to say something and was afraid to, as if he knew that free-and-easy manners and the noise which to some natures passes for happiness was not meet for gentle Eva Considine.

Before hunting was possible, a spell of the sunshine which late October gives us sometimes brightened the world—white misty nights and glorious sun-lit days. With blue sheen overhead, turning all the leaves aglow, as though they were loth to leave, and the silver glint of spider-threads from every stem and flower. So warm, one could sit out as if it were summer. Late roses opened buds the cold kiss had chilled, polyanthuses poked up shy, stunted blooms; the old tobaccos and wallflowers in the tangled flower beds bloomed freely.

Moira, as she went about the neglected garden or walked upon the muddy roads, regretted the sea at Borrisdeane. How clean and cold and blue it would be now, creaming in upon the shingle! What scrambles there had been in late October across the rocks and on the dry cliff path, with the Hermit's long legs

setting the pace; then back to tea with him at Borrisdeane House, chattering and squabbling, or slipping on to the rare moments when, talking quietly, Moira seemed to catch a glimpse of an unknown world.

She yearned for the lost coast, and Captain Milton suddenly put forward a bright idea.

There was sea—a little place called Kildore—within forty miles of Ballydare.

"We'll get the Havilands to come along in their motor, and Cromartin to fetch along his, and we'll run down to spend Sunday there," said Milton. "It'll be rippin' fun. There's a hotel, homely, but quite comfortable, and we'll take our guns; the place is alive with duck and snipe. We'll have a stroll by the shore, too, you and I," added Milton, with fatuous tenderness and a glance of undisguised admiration for Moira, as she stood bare-headed in the clear autumn light.

Fat Mrs. Haviland was swept away upon a flood-tide of persuasion; her dubious views concerning the comfort of the seaside hotel were quite reassured by Captain Milton's statement that he knew a chap who knew another chap who had stayed there regularly for shooting, and who affirmed it to be a nest of homely comfort.

So, having made up the party, they started on a glowing morning to run through a lonely, hilly country down eastwards towards the coast, and then by the Dare, where it broadened to a mighty stream carrying great ships upon its back, with muddy banks glistening to pearl and silver in the sunshine, until they crossed it by a great bridge at

Glendalough, a dirty, busy town, and took the road to Kildore.

Their drive was not fated to be without incident. The untimely slaying of a hen, and the subsequent argument as to its value, caused the first delay ; a puncture to Major Haviland's car the next; the third and longest due to Mr. Cromartin's, an apparent breakage of machinery which occasioned muddy investigation to unseen parts, the emerging of grunting and dissatisfied men, and the final discovery that Cromartin, who was inexperienced, had merely forgotten to turn on the oil tap. They had intended to reach Kildore for lunch and spend the afternoon by the sea, but it was late afternoon, and they were exceedingly hungry, as they passed through the busy shipping town.

For a time they could see the Dare, broadening to a great sheet of water; brown sea-weed fringing its mud-banks now, jutting rocks poking up dark noses, rough sides playing at looking like cliffs; then it was hidden from them, not to be seen again until it was a river no longer, but salt as the waters it met, heaving, between great cliffs at Kildore.

Their road rose steeply, testing the motors' hill climbing, then dipped more steeply still, down a stony road to the sea. High banks covered with golden-hued, dying osmundi, bordered the way; fuchsias still flaunted a few gaudy heads, poking scarlet tassels out among a tangle of brambles The sky was barred with long masses of amber-tinted clouds ; the horizon was a lake of smooth grey, dotted with little islands of a deeper shade. Hills,

ragged-topped, their sides fluffy with gorse, rimmed the harbour about. As they drove down slowly, the waters changed colour; flushed to amber, dulled to green; then suddenly lay grey and still beneath a cold sky as the glow faded from the west.

It was a peaceful little spot, houses clinging to the base of the hills just where they fell away in sharp cliffs to the calm sea. A few fishing boats and a couple of small yachts rocked softly to the gentle swell. It seemed rest impersonified, a spot almost offended by the motors, as, with their trail of petrol smell, they hooted children and hens from their path.

"I hope," said Mrs. Haviland, "that everything is ready. I trust, Captain Milton, that you ordered everything in your letter." Milton assumed the worried look which denotes guilt, and his reply was confused; it seemed inhuman then to confess that he had quite forgotten to write.

"They'll sure to have everything," he said dubiously. "Here we are."

The hotel was of imposing frontage—two-storied, amid the cluster of cottages, and with garden seats on either side of the door. Two girls of attractive appearance were flirting at the door of the bar, and a slatternly elderly woman banging some dough in her hands strayed out as they pulled up.

Their demands seemed to distress her greatly: she put the dough on a garden seat, and then in her distress sat upon it.

"Tea she could give, and rooms; yes, there were rooms, but so large a party!"

Mrs. Haviland turned sternly upon Milton, "The truth of the matter is, you never wrote at all," she said angrily.

Captain Milton's explanation of his servant having forgotten to post the letter was received with cold disbelief.

The attractive young women were with difficulty induced to come to their mother's aid. The cars, one now badly in need of repair, were housed in a shed, and they went in. A dive into the gloomy passage revealed the fact that, as a rotten boat fresh painted, all that was best was outside.

The sitting-room they were ushered into was furnished with fossilised chairs and a musty smell.

One opened the door to let that out and a reek of porter and bad whisky drove in with the solidity of a blow, wrestled with the odour of damp, and, finding it too strong to beat, took its hand and plunged united down unwilling nostrils. A fire, which smoked, dispelled some of the mouldiness, and hot tea brought comfort; but Captain Milton, who had described the "Kildore Arms" as a nest of humble comfort, looked uneasy. The motors had come slowly, and it was too late and cold now to take the walk by the sea which they had agreed upon, and which had sounded so tempting as they discussed it in the morning sunlight. Mrs. Haviland, having adjusted her plump person in the least abominable chair, said it was curiously uncomfortable.

Cromartin, who had been to examine his bedroom, made gloomy remarks concerning Keating's powder; while his terrier, which had accompanied him, scratched itself furiously in corroboration.

"It's not even like the sea." Moira peered at the quiet waters, lapping softly against the steep of the rocks; the tide was in. "You should see our coast at Borrisdeane, with the breakers roaring up over the shingle, and the great waves upon the cliffs." She sat upon a hard chair and scraped the butter from her toast with a soured expression.

Milton, who had counted upon a party of gaiety and flirtation, stroked his moustache sulkily. "We'll have a jolly day to-morrow," he declared, whipping himself to enthusiasm. "A sail if any one likes it; bags of game."

Cromartin, lifting up his dog, remarked unkindly that even the night would not be devoid of killing. "The dog's black with them," he said indignantly, and whirled forth into the evening to look for a chemist.

Mrs. Haviland squeaked, and nothing but the indisposition of one of the motors prevented her starting homewards. She had, she said pathetically, a tender skin. A suggestion of bridge met with immediate favour, until Milton, after a feverish search through his things, found he had forgotten the cards. The party looked at each other through the smoke and felt they would like to say what they wanted to.

The maid-of-all-work, Mary Maria, a high-cheeked, raw-boned young woman with engrimed hands and several holes in her bodice, put her wits to work.

There was surely a pack in the bar, though it might be a bit tossed, and she'd send up to Father

Clancy's, for it so happened that she knew he played spoil five. They might get one from him.

Mary Maria returned proudly, bearing the cards from below, bethumbed, porter tainted; almost indecipherable horrors, which left a trail upon the fingers that—as Cromartin, who had returned gloomily without any Keating, said—you could run a drag on. The priest's, coming later, had a merely cleanly whiff of whisky and tobacco, and were gladly played with.

But to be happy at the Kildore Hotel required iron resolution. Dinner, which was partaken of at a long and dirty table, consisted of an over-kept and straggling chicken, and a roast leg of athletic mutton. It was flung at you by Mary Maria, with under-boiled potatoes on a plate and tinned peas in a sauce boat. The plates were not innocent of their last visit to the same table; there were hideous suspicions that some one had eaten eggs for breakfast, or rice-pudding for lunch.

One other guest, a red-faced commercial traveller, shared the meal—a man with a blunt nose and one of those moustaches which lead you to believe that a man has got hold of a hayfork above his mouth.

Altogether it was a dreary evening, enlivened as far as it could be by whisky-tainted cards and the happy prophecies of Milton as to all the snipe he would shoot upon the morrow. From his account it seemed well that he did not shoot often, or the birds would suffer extermination at his hands. Haviland, who eyed him mildly, said little, only once remarking sadly that he wished he

could manage to bring down three with a right and left, and still have another to kill a stray bird that flew over.

"It was fine shooting," said Major Haviland thoughtfully. "You were a bit off that time, Milton, when we shot Cromfort last year."

Milton said he had a beastly gun that day, and also a sprained wrist, and Haviland nodded as if satisfied.

"He never goes to a shoot," he said—"to give all us duffers a chance, I suppose. That was the only day you went last year, Milton."

Cromartin remarked that Milton shot best when he shot alone, and Milton looked from one to the other with open suspicion, quelled by their guileless faces; and Moira, who could aim straight herself, clasped her hands with enthusiasm. Even the Hermit, whose brilliant shooting was the admiration of Borrisdeane, missed occasionally.

With bated breath she asked if Captain Milton had ever done so. Milton, with the tail of his eye upon Major Haviland's face, said "of course he had. Once when he had fired from a dog-cart, going fast, he had only winged his bird, and again——"

But here Major Haviland upset the coal bucket, saying, "For God's sake let's go to bed," and the tale of the second miss remained untold.

It was a lively night, with no lack of tiny guests in the uncleanly beds. Mary Maria, taxed with the fact in the morning, said it must be the Brothers' school that was there last week, for up to that she never saw but three. It would appear she had counted

them carefully. Eva and Moira woke unrefreshed, to clamour for baths, and be informed that there were but two in the house—one already adopted by the Havilands, with reversion to Mr. Cromartin; the other, now in the room of Captain Milton, just across the passage. The soft sea-air poured through the open windows, the lap of the waters awoke memories of Borrisdeane, the two yearned to be up and out in the now brilliant sunlight. Mary Maria, summoned again and again, bore inquiry patiently, but was apparently too shy to hurry Milton over his dressing. "James, the boots, is away to Mass," she said, "an' sure I couldn't be inthrudin' on the gentleman. But in a minnit, miss, in a minnit." The morning called invitingly, and Mary Maria came not; further peals on the bell were unanswered, so that Moira, her pretty hair all tumbled, went to the door to call. "For I'm sure I heard her coming up," she said to Eva. "Poor thing; I think I'll have to tell him to hurry myself as she's too shy, perhaps, to knock."

Moira had undoubtedly heard Mary Maria come up—in fact, on opening the door she saw that timid damsel upon her knees, her eye fast glued to the keyhole of the opposite door. A huge pail of hot water steamed by her side.

She turned unabashed and smiling, raising her hand for silence, and affixed her eye afresh ere she answered. "I'll have the bath for ye in no time now," she whispered joyously. "In a minnit—one minnit, the captain is jusht stheppin' out of it!"

The sudden yell of Moira's laughter made her step to her feet with a surprised expression.

"Wasn't I watching for ye for tin minnits before I could tell him to put it out to me?" said Mary Maria proudly, as she entered with a flat and rusty bath. "I hadn't the face, d'ye see, to hurry him."

Captain Milton, arriving at breakfast in Harris tweeds of startling hues, was anxious to know what amused them, and was surprised by a further burst of apparently foolish merriment; for Moira had told Mrs. Haviland, and she, being a good wife, had told her husband.

Mary Maria, ignorant of having helped to amuse, gave them a bad breakfast pleasantly.

It was a glorious morning; the sea shone in the sunlight, dimpled and sparkled as a woman before her lover, till its surface was a glitter of light. Kildore is really a lovely little spot, worth visiting if some better landlady took the hotel. To the east a long low range of hills run out until their low points nose into the water. There, at the point, the great tradesman Time had used his hatchet, cutting a slice from the land's end, so that the waters passed through leaving a tiny rocky island. The cliffs about the bay are wreathed with trailing ivy, crowned by gorse, and, in summer, grey with sea-pinks and the gold of the gorse blossoms; the brown weed on the slabs of bared rock hung limply, threshing the water as it rippled up to them.

As they sat out on the low wall the people went by. Mary Maria, a shawl about her frowzy hair, drove off to Leap, a smile on her red face. One forgot the discomfort of the hotel as the soft voices

of the country people whined in tune to the peace of the day, and one looked across the quiet waters to the far shore.

Moira strayed away along the cliffs, looking down at the narrow reaches of pebble bared by the fallen tide. There were no bays or golden sand here, no long shore with its fringe of tumbling, crested waves; the waters ran deep into shore, cold and still, with just a heave in their green-hued depths.

"Charming, isn't it?" Milton had followed Moira. There was no real love of the peaceful beauty in his voice; his manner, in fact, suggested that it was only pretty because he had suggested coming there, and he was therefore disposed to take credit for each hue of land and water.

"It is lovely," said Moira quietly. "A tame sea, chained and gentle, but very pretty to look at. You should see our shore, all froth and breakers and tumble. See——" she stopped abruptly; to speak of Borrisdeane reminded her of the Hermit. He would have known how to admire this quiet little place.

Milton pointed out the way they would drive to the snipe marshes; and Moira, forgetting him and blushing softly, dreamt of the sea beneath her. Milton did not miss the blush; he appreciated it thoroughly. So pretty a girl, ripping good fun; a jolly house to spend one's time at; but Lancelot Milton assessed his matrimonial value highly. When he parted with liberty it must be in return for a large yearly income. Pretty faces paid no household bills. Then, observing that Moira was inattentive, he remonstrated in hurt tones.

"The sea makes one think." She flung some pebbles into the still depths. "It makes me wonder if I shall ever see Borrisdeane again, or if, when I do see it, I shall ever leave it."

"You mean to go back, then?" Milton asked.

"Oh yes. We always meant to; but then we hoped the horses would have been a greater success. Of course, they may be still. I'm afraid I want to see the world."

"But you are sure to," said Milton. "You'll marry."

"Eva will. Then Kathleen and I will be alone—and very poor."

Moira was wrapped in a cloud of reflection, but Milton's tone, as he suggested returning to the village, was remote and nervous. He did not like the trend of the conversation.

Dispassionately, and with a curious face, she stared at Milton, his smart tweeds, with his thin, sleek hair, his fat and self-satisfied face. Was this attention which he paid her what was called love? If he asked her, could she do anything but say yes? A fine shot, a good rider: the Hermit could not laugh at her then.

"Come along," she said, blushing hotly now.

There was business on foot when they got back. Marshes and treacherous bogs spread about a lake beyond the hills. Martin Cronin, the landlady's son, was to guide them to the home of snipe and duck. He was ready now, and observed, as he scanned Milton's suit, that "'twould be better to darken that gintleman with a taste of mud before they loosed him out."

Moira followed on a car, to see the country and the bog. Now, there are a great many snipe and some duck about the brown-hued Loch Granagh, and there were distinctly fewer when two of the men had splashed and squelched and wriggled through breast-high yellowing reed in and out of bog and drains, their eyes ready for the birds which flashed from covert.

The third man, as Moira came up, was standing alone behind a rock, fidgeting with the lock of his gun.

"The hanged thing is out of order," he burst out. "The barrel's bent, and the trigger action is all hampered. I tried a couple of shots once and missed, so I came out to see if I could do anything. It's beastly cold."

Moira crouched behind the rock, and took the gun from him. She slid and examined. She could see nothing wrong; the swish, swish of the reeds told the others were working close. Milton's cartridge case was by his side, and he was lighting a pipe. She slipped two cartridges in and peered round the rock, smiling as she did so. A little brown body winged swiftly past, Moira fired, and the snipe's life was over.

"May the devil roast me if he hasn't one hit," cried the voice of Martin Cronin, from an ambush of reeds. Martin's brown dog, whose great-grandfather might have been a retriever, came slipping out, fetching the snipe tenderly.

Milton's face grew pink with wrath; he snatched the gun back with ill-humour.

"You might have hurt yourself horribly," he said.

Moira looked at him, she looked at Martin Cassidy, at the two drenched, muddy men who had finished their shoot, and she said nothing. Her faith in this paragon was somehow waning dim.

"He to miss two on to his barrel, and hit that one," said the voice of Martin, cruelly clear now.

Major Haviland, laden with little dead feathered things, said he thought they would go home. His expression, as he looked at his captain, was not thoughtful, because he had known beforehand. It was, in fact, crystally transparent.

"That was a nice shot of yours, Miss Considine," he said quietly—he had seen her fire—"especially with a broken gun."

"I mended it," said Milton haughtily, "as I waited here."

Major Haviland said something to himself about its being a good thing to be a locksmith if one wasn't a shot, and wound up his car. There was nothing more to be said. They did not stay a second night at Kildore, but left it in the grey dusk. The harbour lay very still, a single light starring the gloom of the bay. Velvet in the dusk, the hills stole to the water's edge, peace reigned upon the little place, and as they raced away between the steep banks, they knew they would like to return.

It was Mr. Cromartin who suggested in his gentle way that they should all return, and Milton, as

the keenest sportsman, sleep there for another night.

"And why?" said that gentleman, plainly aggrieved.

"Because you'd be sure of a bag," said Cromartin, pulling a lever sharply.

CHAPTER X

CLENNELFORD

WHEN Gog's legs returned to their normal appearance of badly turned bedposts, and The Star was induced to pick delicately at some oats, there were hopes of another hunt. The meet was at Clennelford, some eight miles away, in a hilly, stone-wall country. It was a long way to ride out, so the temptations of James Dunne, who again suggested their hiring the roan horse, were irresistible.

Patsy, "hopin' to God Almighty he wouldn't be kilt," went forth on Gog, with The Star kicking wildly at one side and Jim Crow, jogging like an angel, at the other.

The roan horse stopped for five minutes at the door, and then fled at so merry a pace before the whip that they speedily overtook Patsy, pulled up and looking as if the world was too much for him, while Captain Milton, standing on the road beside his horse, groaned as he nursed an injured knee.

"She struck me fair as I rode past, the —— brute," he explained.

"Faix, turned round an' got the back of her

eye on him, that she might sthrike him fair," said Patsy sourly. "An' I bawlin' to him to wait till I'd cross the road an' push her agin the bank. The divil is in that one's heart, Miss Moira."

Captain Milton remarked with asperity he thought the gentleman mentioned was in her heels; and as a fellow-soldier, who offered to lead his horse, came past, he accepted a proffered seat on the car.

The roan horse started without protest, but proceeded in an uneasy, bumping manner, holding himself in readiness to upset them when he could. He might have forgotten his intention had not a passing motor, as they neared the meet, supplied the opportunity. The roan then bolted with a snort, tearing past traps and led horses, while the girls, unsoothed by the remark of Dunne's friend "that the horse 'ud sthop whin he was tired," shrieked aloud. It was in truth a passage perilous, as they whirled down Clennelford village at a fiery gallop, with the cart pitching like a small steamer. They sped with a clang of catching metal past a motor-car, grazed a dogcart, and all but upset a donkey trap. Moira's feet were swung high in terror; she scrambled for the well, shrieking, while Captain Milton, whose manhood required that he should not show his fear, held her tightly round the waist and shouted encouragement.

It was not a dignified arrival, and, as the roan horse stopped suddenly, the onlookers' faces might have told the Considines it had not furthered them in the eyes of the county. Moira's hat was off; she

still clung to Captain Milton, who, on his part, still embraced her warmly.

"The schamer!" said Dunne's friend. "But it might be worse. Except the bit he tore from the mothor beyant"—he looked back pleasantly—"he has no harm done."

It was of course the Verekers' car. Before they looked they knew they would see Mrs. Vereker's stony eyes gaze at the long seam in her car's body.

"It's fate," said Eva weakly, as she got down.

The Master's sad little face grew gloomier as he observed Moira being hoisted on to The Star.

"That grey mare has a leg as long as a Jew creditor's memory," he said uneasily.

The other Ballydare people looked at the noisy group and shook their heads; they did not want this kind of thing. These three girls were far too good to look at to come swooping into a county where maidens were many and men were few. Dennis Vereker had been seen already to pay Eva attention, and had dragged his unwilling mother to call. She had tumbled into some disgraceful scene—tumblers thrown about and whisky splashed all over her, or something like that.

Mrs. Vereker's icy bow was in itself isolating. There is nothing realised more quickly by sensitive people than unpopularity.

With cheeks which grew pink, with heads held high, the Considines realised that the aloofness of the first day had been no accident; that Ballydare meant to have none of them. Old Knox said "Good-morning" kindly, but showed no intention of intro-

ducing them to his wife; other men came up and talked; the women, many of them doubtfully as they looked at the pretty young faces, kept away. There were no lack of people to talk to though, for the Midshire Regiment gathered about them in force, and because they were unhappy the girls talked over-loudly, chaffed over-brightly, were in every way the good fun they were intended to be.

"Dull old things!" Moira's ready tongue flashed remark upon the county women, picking out differences in their looks, with a sharpness she felt to be hateful. There was nothing to do but to ride past with a crowd of men, to laugh as if she had never been so merry, while all the time her eyes were smarting and her heart aching, and she wanted some one to help and advise her; wanted—the thought amazed her suddenly—the Hermit. His sad, blue eyes would have seen her through the difficulty, his quiet voice have directed her what to do; for Moira was forced to allow to herself that this was not at all what she had intended it to be. The faint welcome they had been accorded was not the triumphal progress which she had pictured. She knew there was to be a dance at Ballyclough in a week's time, to which they were not asked, a big afternoon at Knock Castle, and a hockey match at Kilavon.

There were tears in Moira's eyes as she flashed back over-smart answers to Milton's clumsy badinage, and felt that she welcomed his attentions. He pointed out the country to her, telling her of last year's runs from this particular gorse, and how gallantly he, Lancelot Milton, had ridden them.

Once, early in the year, a fox had crossed the valley to Dirk Hills, ten miles away; they had found late, and run until it was too dark to see the fences on the heathery slopes of the hill. People had been left that evening, but he—he pointed to a cottage on the slope—had jumped a huge coped wall there and got slap off with them.

"It was a fizzer, I tell you. A hunt to dream of," said Milton, seeing Moira's eyes widen in admiration.

Another memorable day they had run left-handed off the hill, got away from the stone-wall country and crossed the brown bog they could see in the lowlands. It appeared that there were huge drains there, and one in particular about eighteen feet wide, which his good horse had cleared without a scramble. Moira's eyes grew brighter; it was an honour to talk to this flyer of the hunt. She thought she would try to follow him if they got away.

Dennis Vereker's pleasant red face drifted towards them; he was clearly looking for Eva. "Remember the big hunt to Dirk from here, Milton?" he said. "Not many of us got through that."

Milton said people could not see in the dark, but he did not seem to want to talk any more about the hunt.

"Moroney, my mother, Knox, and Hamilton were alone with them when they were whipped off," went on Dennis, oblivious of other topics.

"Oh, then you didn't get to the hill," said Moira, looking at Milton, who had given her to understand otherwise.

"Milton! He never got off the hill *here*," said Dennis, with brutal candour. "He got about the same start as I did."

"Oh!" said Moira, while Captain Milton murmured something concerning bad memories in a peevish voice.

The Star was not kicking so often to-day, though, if Moira had known, she was far more dangerous, for the mare abandoned mere lashes into the brown, and took to diving at an unwary follower with a deadly precision.

Hounds were thrown into a patch of gorse on bare hillside; rolling hills all round, fenced with loose stone walls. It was the country which the Hermit had spoken of, and Moira's spirits rose. The Star could jump stone walls. The close gorse crackled as the hounds waded through; sterns, some tipped with blood, waved in barer places, at times a lean head rose as a hound leaped. A whimper sounded. He was there, lying close in some thick corner. There was no covert to dwell in, and a moment later he broke, a small, light-coloured fox, slipping away down the hill, and ere he was a field away Moroney had his hounds out. There was no waiting at Ballydare: to kill a fox you must press him. But "smell," the mysterious, failed them to-day. There was no driving on a red-hot scent, as there had been through the bog. Short time as their fox had been gone, they could only hunt in snatches, racing for a moment, pulling up as hounds diverted, and always with wild yells from some neighbouring slope as the countrymen viewed him. For he was a ringing and soon a tired little fox, twisting up and down until

he sought shelter in every hedge, without spirit to dash away for some distant covert. There was nothing to jump but the loose stone walls and an occasional single bank. It was The Star's day. With her head up, she flew the highest spots, tucking up her long legs like a deer. Nothing mattered to Moira as they cleared one stiffer than the rest, while more careful people wrestled with a gate. The cheque began to appear once more, the hope of selling the grey to become a certainty. The girl's cheeks flushed, her eyes sparkled, she was a very pretty thing in her startling habit as she sat down to the rocketing springs, and felt that, after all, her mare was a treasure. It suited Eva also, for there were many gaps to walk through, and constant checks to give the big horse time. Dennis Vereker, one wary eye upon his mother, also managed to be far behind, and to take Eva by short ways which she would never have thought of.

And through it, as they circled and galloped and checked, Moira was surprised not to see Captain Milton thrusting ahead. Instead she saw him more than once taking his turn at gaps with a strange and unambitious meekness. The explanation was forced upon her at one of the many checks.

"Rotten hunt! He was saving his horse for the evening."

They galloped on slowly, up one hill, down another, with the yells in front growing in volume.

"Come on, let ye! Come on! He was dead beat here, an' the tail thrailing on him. Come on, Misther Moroney, an' kill him. Huroo! Woo!"—the wild,

eerie Irish yells rising shrilly in their longing for a kill.

Sportsmen to the heart's core, if no paid patriots were there to turn their childish minds to thoughts of resentment against the huntsmen who pound across their land.

"Begor, ye have him nearly cot." A man came flying to open a gate. "He's but two minutes up the hedge here, and he's lookin' for a rat-hole. Make on, let ye, with yer dogs!"

And the said dogs were at fault. Moroney mildly pointed out the difficulty of hurrying.

The man remarked with contempt that "they were no use for smhellin', and wasn't there some one schreechin' now beyant? Begor, ye'll nivir kill him if ye delay," he added sourly, as they hit it off and galloped on.

The hill they now crossed was fenced with high bramble-grown banks, and The Star found life more trying, but the ditches were fortunately narrow, so that she did not come to grief. She was, however, tiring rapidly.

"It's lovely. Oh, too lovely." Kathleen's eager cry to her sister came to the Master's ears, and he absolutely smiled. He had heard Mrs. Vereker's stories; his hounds had been kicked by The Star; but his heart warmed to a lover of hunting. If he had a wife he would have sent her to call. As it was, he said something sadly pleasant, as he rode past, about the Star's wall jumping, and sent Moira's spirits to fever point. At the very next fence, Mrs. Knox came down and Moira caught her horse. They were away from the rest of the field. The thin

lady smiled at the deed, and decided to be civil. Clearly this was a day of good fortune.

She would come to call. She rode on, listening to Moira's prattle with an indulgent smile. Meantime, the rings grew smaller, and they were very near a beaten fox; dead tired, he crawled before them, listening to the yap, yap, but two fields behind, and then he saved himself. A marsh lay at the hill's base; cobalt and golden brown, brilliant blue waters a-ripple against a mesh of coarse grasses and reeds. In its midst rose a little island, and there he found shelter. Countrymen dancing on the brink had seen him cross, shrill voices urged the pack to follow. "Go on, let ye. Cess, cess, he's beyant. Arrah, swhim it over, ye divils."

It was a pretty sight in the sunlight, as hounds splashed and swam on the verge, while the Master swore softly. The faint scent had vanished here on the cold bog. There was absolutely nothing to be done, for a wide stretch of deep waters guarded the tiny island, and after some seasonable suggestions advising collapsible boats instead of terriers, they had to leave him.

"An' he scharce able to swim," observed the local postman, who had been throwing stones across, with some vague idea that the hounds might go out and fetch them. "Ould Duck at home'd be better for thim," he added contemptuously. "If I threw a rock for her, she wouldn't be long, I tell ye."

A dark cloud was creeping upwards as they jogged to the next draw; rain coming swiftly over the river. They had just found when it fell; no ordinary

shower, but straight and heavy, and tropical in its violence, and with sting of melted hail in its chill touch. The hillside, the square covert, were blotted out; horses were huddled against the green hedges, with some delusive idea of gaining shelter. As they stood in the cold dimness, drenched and wretched, the Dirk hills were shadow-flecked, still golden in patches beneath the sun, and the tableland between lay fair and green, a perfect hunting country. What scent there had been was washed away; even hounds faltered, unable to face the storm of pitiless waters.

Minds detached themselves from fox-hunting, turned swiftly to the glow of firesides; the comfort of hot water, of steaming tea and buttered toast. Horse after horse was slipped away off the hill. Moira and Eva, standing talking to Dennis Vereker, yearned for the car and for a shelter.

"The road was close by," he told them. His eyes grew sad, for he knew that his house was just beyond it, and that he dared not ask them in.

"You live down there, don't you?" asked Moira. "You will soon be dry."

The much-crushed will of Denis Vereker wriggled and almost stood up. He murmured something incoherent about their being too wet to ask in, and his eyes dwelt upon Eva, pretty still, though a stream of water trickled down her face, and her fair hair was drenched. There were moments when Dennis regretted his habit of serfdom, and this was one of them. He was as much in love as he dared to be.

"I——" He raised his head, his red face shining in the rain. "I——"

"Dennis," said a voice from the other side of the hedge. "Have you seen Dennis? I want him to come home at once. He had a slight cold this morning. Dennis!" The clear, hard voice rose to a call.

"I think—— I suppose I had better go." Dennis looked at the gap in the hedge—and Eva knew he was counting his chances of reaching it before his mother knew who he was talking to.

"Yes, I certainly think so," she said drily, and something in her eyes made that long crushed will power wriggle again, this time with a wrench of pain.

He rode away quickly, and Eva, looking down at her dripping gloves, hummed a tune. It was an air she had often heard two years ago upon the lake at Borrisdeane. "Glory to the men of old," and to her too came a quick tinge of pain.

"How on earth can you sing songs in the deluge!" said Moira wrathfully. "You might be a Lorry."

Eva presumed thoughtfully that she meant a Lorelei, and they galloped to find the car. Patsy's fears were not heeded now; the horses were so dejected that he led them without difficulty, and even the roan forebore to stop when asked to start. James Dunne's friend, who smelt fierily of whisky, and who said huskily "that if he closed his eyes he'd think the Dare was rollin' over him," took advantage of this strange gentleness to beat the roan to a canter and keep him at it until they swung on one wheel through the gates at The Beeches. Here he demanded still more whisky, and was sent away in a somnolent state,

with James Dunne, who promised to return " whin he had the craythe r at home," driving.

Biddy declared she would rather peel eggs than undo their habits, and pitied them sorely. And old Dunne, who returned, quickly made boiling hot tea to comfort and warm them.

CHAPTER XI

THEATRE-GOING

IT was Moira who suggested going to the theatre. With eyes which sparkled with excitement, she read in the *Ballydare Moderator* that Mr. Seploy and full company were about to play nightly in the Town Hall. Now, Moira had read of footlights and powder and patches. She had even had her dream (as almost every girl has) of acting herself; coming, a vision of beauty, in a setting of painted canvas, and holding great London audiences spellbound. But she had seen nothing.

"We must go, Eva"—she waved the newspaper, sweeping her sisters with her in her usual impetuous way. "We must make up a party and go. You can wear your pale blue (you've not had it on yet), and I my cream, and Kathleen——"

Kathleen said she was going out to a far meet, on a horse of Malone's. She would be too tired to hunt. Mr. Stanley and Mr. Leeds were driving her there.

There was no kindly voice to warn the Considines that people might raise eyebrows at this method of accepting lifts.

"Well; we'll go, then. Milly will come"—they

used the regimental nickname in private, and Moira mentally determined to ask Dennis Vereker. She met him in the town that morning, waiting in the motor for his mother, and propounded the idea.

"Have you got any idea of what it's like?" he said dubiously.

Moira feverishly declared that it was a magnificent company, coming straight from London to act Irish plays. Lots of people would go. They were longing to, and it would be fun. Her match-making mind thought of Eva in the flimsy blue chiffon, with a large bow at the back, to hide where the Borrisdeane dressmaker had pulled the bodice crooked.

Dennis knew that on various widely distant occasions Ballydare did go to the Town Hall, and he thought this might be one of them. With a weak protest he promised, and promptly lost himself in the invention necessary to lull his mother's suspicions. Dennis at bridge in barracks was fairly safe, and had served before on other occasions; so he was ready before the coldly handsome presence, wrapped in furs, descended upon him.

"Dining in barracks. With whom?" Mrs. Vereker queried sharply. She could not penetrate behind those gloomy, grey walls, and the fear of an after adjournment to the Considines was upon her. Dennis shaved a donkey-cart with some skill. His brain was not a ready one; he wanted time.

As the terrified driver of the ass adjusted herself, and prayed to the Virgin to "blight thim mothors," Dennis's thoughts were ready.

"With Cromartin," he said; and then groaned,

seeing that tall youth in uniform, a bank book in his hand, lounging down the narrow street. That he should hail them, and inquire if he would meet them to-night at the Havilands', seemed just what Dennis had expected.

"When you'd asked me to dine with you?" said Dennis unhappily, with contortions of his nose and eyes which made Mrs. Mahony, glancing from her shop, spread the tale that "Misther Dennis had the St. Vitus got." Cromartin, observing these signs, remembered his hospitality with feverish haste; but Dennis's invention had nearly played him false.

He dined, instead, at The Beeches, and wondere why soup, and roast ducks, and snipe, with Ma Kate waiting spasmodically (in the intervals of talking to Patsy), was so much a nicer dinner than the long, gloomy feasts in the great dining-room at Knock Castle, with footmen to anticipate each want, and wines for every course. The silence ate into one's appetite, there; the marble men and women seemed to watch and grudge. His voice, as he answered his mother, echoed into the corners, until he was glad when there was no answer to make—he could eat in silence. Eva, in the blue chiffon, was pretty enough to witch a stronger-natured man; there was no Captain Milton to change the merriment to doubtful chaff, and throw bread at bared arms and necks; and Dennis, whose life knew little peace, felt it fall upon him and wrap him about as a warm cloak wraps chilled shoulders. There was no necessity to lie; no need to form and frame the constant excuses which were always upon his lips. And

yet, as he watched Eva, and felt the little spirit left in him quicken to her glance, some instinct seemed to whisper that his chains were stronger than his desire; that the bride who would come with him to Knock Castle would never be of his choosing. Thus his weak nature, abandoning thought, was content to be happy, until Moira, watching, felt that all was as it should be, and she would soon write to the Hermit, telling him of her great success; Eva, reigning at the big, quiet house; Eva, with diamonds in her pretty hair, with horses and motor-cars, and weak, pleasant Dennis Vereker as a husband. Of Eva's own ideas on the subject Moira did not think at all. They drove down in the motor. Dennis, who had only been to charity entertainments, saw nothing unusual in their evening dresses; but Captain Milton, who was waiting sourly on the doorsteps, glanced at them with dismay, announcing that not a decent soul had gone in, and he was afraid they would be stared at. Better keep on their wraps.

But bared necks and rustling frills were not joys to be lightly forgone. The girls took off their coats, and sat down amid an audience which smelt lightly of porter, and heavily of tobacco and many other things.

The little stuffy hall, with a dingy curtain drawn across a narrow stage, was not Moira's idea of a theatre. She looked about in unveiled disappointment, while the muttered remarks of her neighbours drifted to her ears.

"Queer ones, the quality." This from a young woman in a pink flannel blouse and a green hat.

"Wouldn't you be ashamed now, Misther Magee, to come bare like that?"

Mr. Magee, a stalwart and dirty youth, observed that indeed and he would.

"Just a whirl of chiffong for a sleeve," a whisper from another maiden. "My dear, but I'd be cowld in it meself, Danny."

Danny, who was apparently a theatre goer, said he'd seen the quality stripped before. "'Twas the only way they'd listen to a play," he explained. "He'd seen thim here when the gentlefolk acted a play, here, and away in Dublin, where they'd dazzle ye round in the boxes."

All these remarks were too clearly audible. Captain Milton stared round haughtily, with the furious expression of the man who does not know how to carry out his fury, and Dennis Vereker, perceiving they ought never to have come, grew crimson and unhappy. They were a mark for every glance among the soberly dressed crowd, and he clearly caught the eye of their steward, who was away for the night. The play was "The Shaughraun," and the house was crowded; crowded, curiously enough, with a great many priests, and men who bent to whisper to them, as though some plot was on foot.

Now, it so happened that the same company, playing at Ballydare a year before, had deeply offended some of the more religious people there by their reading of the piece. English people are over-apt to burlesque the Irish; the Catholic Church was up in arms at what they deemed mockery of their profession, and were there that night to protest, if certain

things were acted in the same way again. The little party from The Beeches had unwittingly lighted on an unfortunate evening for their outing, and the curtain rose at last, and the famous drama was played on. Despite the drawbacks of her surroundings; despite the hopeless task of English people trying to master the Irish accent; despite the vulgarity which they undoubtedly introduced; Moira followed it all with shining eyes and bated breath, and a complete lack of attention to her companion, who whispered sneering comments in her ear.

"Play!" He laughed aloud as the curtain came down. "Call that a play! I really believe you looked at it, Miss Moira."

Moira, unashamed, said she had.

"Play! If I could take you to London, to a show at the Gaiety! Dresses an' songs an' dances an' Connie Ediss an' Payne an' Grossmith. That's a play, if you like. None of your hang-talkey talk, but something to laugh at all along, and people you know of to look at."

The criticism aptly represented Milton's view of life, but Moira was lost in its dazzle. She had read of great names, and quoted them now glibly. Tree, Wyndham, Bouchier. If she could but see some of those.

"Tree?" Milton shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, if you come to a play with me it'll be to something worth seeing. Tree's all right—not that I ever saw him—but he acts Shakespeare, rotten old stuff, all about nothing. No, thanks. Oh, here's the show on again."

There had been a whispering among the black-coated listeners ; a working up, as it were, to some course of action. Looks of protest, pointings, hands waved in indignation, and one man, a fat and bald-headed tradesman, was called upon and shoved forward, moving his lips as though rehearsing a speech. The remarks were plainly audible, and Dennis listened uneasily.

" That's McCann," watching a young priest whisper in the ear of a red-headed man ; " and that old fellow he's talking to is Conolly the draper. I wonder what's up, or what's annoying them ! They're fair fire-brands, both of 'em."

" A gross travesty. I tell ye 'tis that same on our race an' ways." Conolly the draper had a rolling voice. " Oh, I'll sphake, yer reverence. I will indeed." He stopped as a cracked bell rang behind the scenes, the curtain was dragged up in jerks, and a grimy hand turned down the footlights one by one.

The old play proceeded to the well-known scene of the wake ; with Con lying dead, and the actors about him doubling their efforts to be merry and make people laugh. It was undoubtedly a burlesque upon the Irish customs, but it held the greater portion of the house. Father Dolan, a thin man with a distinct cockney accent, drew down laughter as he drank whisky from a teapot, and winked out that he did not know it, for " tay."

The lady in the pink blouse giggled hysterically. Danny, close to them, said " Begor, 'twas grand." But the laughter ceased suddenly, for fat Conolly shot to his feet, a priest at either elbow.

"I protest," he roared loudly; "I protest on yer actin'; 'tis a travesty ye're makin' on our race an' on our ways. Sthop ye're play or act it dacent; that's what I'm v'icin now for us here. What's that, ye're reverence? Maybe I am forgettin' what ye told me. Anyway, I say I protest; the play must be stopped."

The actors stood amazed. Father Dolan, holding the teapot, scurried to the wings. Con's mother said "Lor' a mussy" as she caught at a stage Irishman, who hurriedly replied, "Crikey—strike me blind."

The audience, for a space, were silent, then, believing it to be right, cheered the interrupters lustily, those who had laughed loudest being the most emphatic.

The actors looked at Con, who was their actor manager, and the uproar swelled and grew.

Mr. Conolly very testily called for silence, so that he might speak. "This is no light thing," he said. "I protest. Ye're all actin' drunk at a dacent wake, an' that's disgracin' our country an' our clergy. Ye do it like this over in England, and people believe 'tis true. I tell ye ye're renderin' is an or—gie—no less." Conolly wiped his face. "Not a sober man on the stage," he boomed.

The corpse of Con, listening to urgent appeals, rolled off the bed and strolled down to the footlights. He was a lean, leisurely man, with a red complexion, badly obscured by powder. His first endeavours to speak were drowned in a storm of boos, but he gained silence after a time.

"Bit 'ard, isn't it?" said the corpse thoughtfully;

"played it this way for years. No intention to offend. I wasn't drunk, anyhow. Was I, eh?"

"You were the very worst, sir," thundered Conolly, red hot for argument and further oratory.

"I was dead, man," said the corpse plaintively.

"Dead drunk," a ready Irish voice spoke, and the house roared to sudden laughter. Con's corpse, eyeing them peevishly, chewed a toothpick and balanced a corpse candle on his forefinger.

When given time again, he said he was sorry if they'd offended; they had been taught to act it like that.

"It was . . . what, Father? . . . A burlyesque, sir," thundered Conolly; "a carric-a-turey, a turey, a travestie. All of ye dhrunk, includin' yerself, the corpse, that was no betther than the resht, but worse, since he manages it all. Did ever one of ye—ye boys," he whirled to his now sympathetic audience—"did iver one of ye see Father Connol or Father Maddigan to drink whisky from a teapot an' ye lyin' dead?"

No one seemed to have done so. The appeal wrought instant effect. The men in the audience, with true Irish readiness, sprang to their feet. With roars and boos and hisses and howls they swarmed for the stage, thundering curses upon Con and his fellow mummers, reserving special threats for Father Dolan, who was pointing the teapot nozzle at his enemies, vowing as they rushed on that they'd stretch Con's corpse into a real one before they'd done.

Fat Conolly, caught by the wave, was unfortunately the first to suffer. He went down beneath the stamp-

ing feet, crawling beneath the chairs for safety, and praying for assistance.

Con's mother, a young actress, flung her arms about her dead son, shrilling police and murder as she did so at the audience. The curtains were dragged to, and the orchestra, who was a solitary pianist, swarmed for safety over the footlights, howling for mercy as Father Dolan's teapot, which he had discharged at the audience ere he fled, struck him full in the face.

The Considines and their escort were swept away by the crowd, engulfed in the mass of angry men, bent this way and that as the uproar increased, and finding the difficulty of staying together greater at each moment. Finally Moira found herself clinging convulsively to the man she had heard called Danny, who, being peaceful, was struggling towards the door. Dan held her tight and called her "darlin'," apparently convinced that he was rescuing his own young woman, and also upbraided her when he found breath for not courting quietly over the fire at home. Some way off Moira could see Dennis Vereker's red young face as he defended Eva, and Milton struggling wildly by himself.

They got at last into the quiet street, torn, panting, bruised, to fly to the protection of two policemen, who had no idea of the turmoil within. Moira abandoned her protector, and fled to seize the coated arm of the law, while Danny searched helplessly for Katie, still believing he had brought her out. A large portion of the crowd had surged out to wait at the stage door, and her horror-stricken eyes now beheld Dennis Vereker being taken for one of the actors.

His red face had brushed against a wall and was streaked with white, and his dark coat covered his evening clothes.

"'Tis the corpse, the divil," bellowed a youth; and Dennis, putting Eva behind him, looked into a sea of furious faces and found explanation vain.

"The corpse an' his mamma, no less," said some one else. "We'll tache ye," and followed the speech with a blow, which caught Dennis on the nose.

The pain sent caution flying. Dennis knew how to fight, and had already injured two assailants, and knocked down Danny, who was doing nothing, when his steward, working to his side, yelled his true name to the attackers.

The crowd drew back instantly. "God save us; 'tis Misther Vereker, an' he having put two of me teeth down me throat."

Dan, the non-combatant, spitting blood, threatened the law for assault, and evil fate ordained that the reporter of the local paper should be swept close to them to hear and note it all.

A motor hooted, driving slowly through the crowd. It was Cromartin coming home from dinner, and he pulled up. He looked from panting, torn Moira to panting, frightened Eva; he considered Dennis's swollen nose; he stared at the surging crowd and the two policemen, who were rapidly producing order; and he remarked, with feeling, that he did not think he would care for the play at Ballydare.

"What in the name of Heaven's happened?" he asked, as he wrapped Moira in a coat.

"It was the wake,"—Moira dashed into the car—"and the whisky and the corpse, and he got drunk, or they said he did, and he spoke, and that was it."

Cromartin, with a worried air, said he saw it all plainly. From his manner it was quite evident that he believed Dennis to have been slightly drunk. He looked about. "Vereker was with your sister, but where the Dickens is Milton?"

"So far as I could see," said Dennis, "he just lit for safety the moment the fun began."

He got to his car, winding it up hurriedly, and they drove away just as Captain Milton, who had sheltered in the cloak-room, appeared at the door, and fell to cursing softly.

His subsequent explanation of having been absolutely swept away, of fighting hard for his own life and that of three shop-girls, was received with some reserve on the part of his hearers. But Moira, as she looked at the remains of her cream dress, felt her desire for theatre-going at Ballydare die in her.

To Dennis Vereker's horror he saw next day before he got up that concealment was impossible; for the local reporter, seeking to please the local magnate, described the matter fully. "The presence of the Miss Considines, accompanied by Captain Milton and Mr. Vereker, of Castle Knock," was one of the headlines; "Young Ladies Swept Away by the Crowd—Gallant Behaviour of a Local Gentleman." Dennis, with blinking eyes, felt shame tingle through him as he read how he had fought, saving Eva as he went; how he had been set upon outside, mistaken by

foolish people for Con's corpse; how he had stricken and been struck.

The thunderous presence of his mother was not long delayed. She had read the paper before he had. Black-haired, splendidly handsome, she towered over her supine son, while her quick tongue sought and found words to show her anger.

"These shameless girls—mere adventuresses. To have gone where no lady would have entered; to have led Dennis there! She knew now that he had lied to her. They would see after—these young women—that no decent soul would speak to them."

And Dennis Vereker, over-used to tyranny, cowered and said nothing. It is hard to break a lifelong leading string, yet Eva's pretty face reproached him as he lay silent. She was between his fancy, and his mother's rule might be a greater one than she dreamt of.

Patsy, who had been to the pit—or what passed for one—with Mary Kate, said "'twas grand." "Sure, between the play an' the fightin', ye couldn't wish for more," he said next day; "and the corpse chewin' a feather pen in his mouth an' all. If we had but a few things to be throwin', we might have done a bit more. Faix, they left to-day," said Patsy disconsolately, "or I'd have gone agin to-night. I was too far back," he added, as he polished up Gog's thick hide, "but I got in one clout to a lad that sthepped on me toe—one he'll remember, too; an' I thrampled another's hat, an' that was all I had out of it."

So far as the real reason of the row went, Patsy was quite devoid of interest.

These were somewhat troublous days for Patsy, for he was in love. Mary Kate, with the puffed hair, had witched his heart from him. In vain did old Biddy, whose great-nephew he was, warn him; in vain did James Dunne, now busy at making oat-bins, drop hints concerning Mary Kate's other attachments and the futility of Patsy contemplating matrimony on the sum of fourteen pounds per annum. Patsy's wants during his life had been few; he had some money in the post-office bank, and he lavished it now to buy smiles from the fair Mary Kate.

Eva's housewifely soul found that such love-making did not help her handmaiden to work. She found there were but faint streaks in layers of dust where polished surface should have appeared, though Mary Kate declared lightly she'd given it a whip with a duster the very day before, before she ran out for a message—the message being Patsy. There were stacks of cups left unwashed in the pantry, and Patsy was found washing them when he ought to have been with his horses. The Star's delicate appetite missed its pampering, and she grew leaner daily; Gog ate his bed, unchecked by muzzling; even Jim Crow was not so well. The Considines' tender hearts were averse to separating the lovers, but they felt that something must be done.

James Dunne, consulted delicately, scratched his white locks with thoughtful fingers. It appeared that he knew for a fact that Mary Kate was merely trifling, and he advised patience.

"Sorra a patience I'd have with their likes," stormed Biddy. "'I'll be away for a packet of hairpins, Biddy,'

says she ; and all the shops shut, an' Patsy waitin' on the road."

It was in such straits that the Hermit's help was so badly wanted. He would have known what to say to Patsy, and what to do to the gay Mary Kate. In her distress at The Star's loss of flesh, Moira sat down and wrote to him ; and the tone of her letter, underlying the constant assertions of success, lacked spirit. Eva was growing frightened at the over-quick spending of their money ; no one wanted, so far, to buy the horses—the undercurrent of all this ran through Moira's letter to Borrisdeane. But, on the other side, she could hint at Eva's great conquest ; she could recount the tale of their many gaieties—their motor drives, their bridge parties—and this she did at length.

The Hermit's reply came as she expected it to—by return of post. "He was not at all sure," he said, "that he, too, would not leave Borrisdeane for a time. After all these years he thought he would like a change. So Mrs. Vereker did not like them"—there was a blot on the page, as though he had raised his pen to think. "It was strange, that. And she is handsome still?" The Hermit seemed to think a great deal about Mrs. Vereker, thought Moira, as she read. "But there are better things than great beauty, Moira," he wrote, "and a man learns this after a time. Its glamour sweeps one away ; rouses the love which is not real love, but a thing red-clad, with wrath and envy, and other evil things drawn in its carriage. Then later, perhaps, the same man may learn what real love is : love

for a girl whose heart is gold below her childish follies——"

Moira put the letter down, her little face growing strangely thoughtful. Why should the Hermit write to her like this? Was he, after all these quiet years, in love himself? Going away to be married? To whom? Moira seemed to hear the dull boom of the waves, hear the whisper of the lake through the reeds; see Oliver Tremayne's quiet face as he pulled his boat to the landing-place of piled-up stones. He, too, was leaving. If they went back, he would not be there to come across; there would be no one to wrangle with, no one to mock at her flights of fancy, to cut in with a pungent word which laid some wilful folly bare. The stupid old Hermit; she had hated him lately; chafed bitterly because she felt in her inmost heart that he might have been right about this expedition which she had forced upon the others. Something hurt Moira's throat, she felt her eyes grow wet without knowing why. At Borrisdeane there had been no bitter experience of being ignored by the people one wished to know; no constant adding up and paying out of losses at this difficult game of bridge; no fears that the horses one counted so much on might go wrong.

She took the letter up again. The Hermit reproached her for a lack of real news. Who had called upon them? Did they know people? Were the horses really going well? If she wanted help would she not write? Who was this Milton she mentioned?

Moira frowned now. Why should he think so persistently that things had gone wrong? What help

could Oliver Tremayne, a mere recluse and hermit, give to her in this new home? And because she knew that things were not all as they should be, and that she wanted the help he proffered, she flashed back a saucy letter full of their joys, and very full of the friendship of Captain Milton, who rode and fished and shot, and was always out with them; told how Kathleen had mounts from a horse-dealer, and was driven out by kindly young men; how they had people to dine, and sat up until one in the morning playing bridge, and various other things, which made Tremayne sigh very deeply, and confirmed him in his intention of leaving Borrisdeane.

Moira put her letter away, and went to the yard. A visit to The Star lacked power of consolation. The mare was listless, and plainly ill; her coat stared, she would merely pick at her oats. Gog's legs had again swelled to the thickness of "bolsthers." If they wanted to hunt, it was evident that they must hire from Malone, who let horses out. Kathleen paid nothing, but they were different.

There was a good meet on Friday, and they must get out. Eva, looking helpless, said it would be four guineas, and they could not afford it, yet allowed James Dunne and his donkey-cart to be dispatched to summon Malone. The horse-dealer arrived at once to say he could match them with a grey and a black; one a trifle hasty at his lips, and the other a bit fearsome of his foremost legs when he'd land; but both great horses that he hired regularly to the officers. Also, as they were young ladies, and light-weights, he'd want but three guineas for the two."

He examined The Star with dubious eyes. "Her likes, Miss Moira, niver does no good," he said emphatically. "Ye see, she has no middle on her, and one day's huntin' 'd be as bad to her as three to a sthronger med horse. When ye ride the black to-morrow, maybe ye might care to have a swhop. I wouldn't be hard on the bit of boot. With ye're weight on him he'd lasht a lifetime. I could get rid of this one."

Moira gasped. To "swhop" The Star, the peerless mare which was to bring her in hundreds of pounds; to give her and extra money for some broken-down old black who favoured his foremost legs. And Malone was serious; he even looked as though he meant it to be a kindness. Tears smarted again behind Moira's eyelids; she recovered herself with difficulty as she haughtily pointed out to Malone that she considered The Star extremely valuable.

Malone observed drily there was "nothin' like one's own opinions."

"She is fast, well bred, beautifully bred," clamoured Moira angrily.

"Oh, she's that," said the horse-dealer; "she's that. Hasn't she ivery bad point she could take from the racin' side of her? I'd misdoubt me, but this half thoroughbred, sure, if ye handled her shins rough, ye could break them. Faix, keep her, miss; 'twas only kindness, and knowin' a felly that wanted a horse for posthin' with me."

Moira left him examining Gog, and advising much medicine and less hay. It was Eva's turn now.

They were out to lunch next day with fat Mrs.

Haviland, who was unshaken in her kindness, and came back early, bringing Major Haviland and Captain Milton with them to play bridge. As they walked up the little path sounds of wailing from the kitchen told them something was wrong. Biddy's voice, raised to a high pitch, could be heard in heated argument, the lower tones of James Dunne, and the sharp zip, zip, of something being torn.

The drawing-room was cold, devoid of fire, and thick with dust. The bridge tables were not out; the breakfast things in the dining-room were still upon the table. Mary Kate had been given to clearing them away when fancy touched her; but she had never been so late as this.

"Something has happened." Eva pealed at the bell, and glanced disconsolately at her guests. To make matters worse, she saw a carriage on the road, and recognised Mrs. Knox coming to call. Biddy, tears in her eyes, hurried to answer the bell.

"Oh, I said it all along, Miss Eva; I said it. There's me poor dead sisther's daughter's bhoy fair dementhed outside, and Mary Kate off to Dublin by the one thrain, leaving a note to say she's away to be married an' to sind on her things. An' Patsy, the craythur, to buy her a little traither of a watch that wasn't as big as me thumb top, an' to spind fifty shillin', no less, on a muff for her neck."

Here Milton shook audibly, to Biddy's indignation.

"He did that same," she said sharply, "a yally fur muff she put about her throat. An' that"—she raised her finger that they might listen—"that ye hear now is Patsy, clane crazy, tearin' up her aperns!"

What consolation Patsy derived from this will ever remain a mystery; but as Mrs. Knox clamoured for entrance, they all fled to the kitchen to find Patsy rending viciously, surrounded by a pile of torn white calico, falling in ragged strips and jagged ends as he dragged the stuff asunder.

James Dunne, looking on, said he thought it must "aise" him.

Patsy looked at the rush of onlookers, rent one more apron in twain, scattered the scraps of the others in the air so that they fell upon every one, and, with a sudden gulp of anguish, fled to the stables, where he locked himself in for the evening, and answered all questions by asserting, amid his sobs, that he had done with "the wimmin."

"Maybe he thought 'twas herself," said James, removing a piece of calico from his head. "Two shillin', no less, she must have paid for some of thim."

They returned to find Mrs. Knox, who despaired of an answer, laying her cards upon the table. She could scarcely have gathered a good impression on this, her first visit, for the fire would not light. There were no hot cakes for tea, and Biddy, as she appeared, was covered with ravelled threads of torn calico. But a recital of Patsy's wrongs atoned for many things. Notwithstanding the tales afloat about the Considines, she was glad she had come.

Since the theatre episode, and the exposing of the perjured Dennis in the *Ballydare Moderator*, Mrs. Vereker's bitter tongue had spared no lash of innuendo which could hurt the newcomers. To have her son involved in a disgraceful brawl, struck upon the nose,

rescued by his own steward, described as a gallant knight, who had put his lady behind him and fought his way forth, was gall to his proud mother. That he had lied to her was a smaller thing, for tyrants expect untruths.

Dennis's life, while his hurt nose faded to coats of many colours, was not an easy one. He was closely watched, jealously guarded, almost refused leave to go out without his mother accompanying him. Mrs. Vereker was afraid of Eva's pretty face ; but she was a power in the county, and used that power now with purpose and with weight.

Mrs. Knox had heard the stories and braved them. Bright little Moira had found one friend who meant to be kind to her—a friend who recognised that lack of worldly wisdom, and no deeper folly, had led the three Considines into coming to Ballydare and getting themselves talked about. Moira, always anxious to prattle, gave a sketch of their idea of their over-quiet life at Borrisdeane, their longing to hunt and see the world.

"And you like it very much—your world here?" Mrs. Knox looked at Moira with quietly inquiring eyes.

"It is—great fun." Moira wished the look had not reminded her of the Hermit.

"Perhaps too much fun." Mrs. Knox asked for her carriage. She asked them out to luncheon on Sunday, and meant then to be mother to the motherless, telling them how they erred in trying to see too much fun, and how three very young girls must imperatively provide themselves with some older lady to live with them.

Biddy, as she announced the carriage, feared the horse must be perished, for Patsy had absolutely declined to open the stable door.

"He's sitting in The Sthar's box," said Biddy disconsolately, "hopin' she'll kick him to death. But he has her tied up, and is a long way from her heels all the time."

"There is hope for Patsy," said Mrs. Knox, going out.

CHAPTER XII

THE HIRELINGS AND THE GEOGHANS

DONOUGH MORONEY, standing gloomily among his hounds, looked up as the Considines jogged up to the meet.

"Thank God," he said, "the grey's at home. That little one's pretty," he added to himself. He swung himself into his saddle with a happy expression, and jogged on to the first draw. It was a great woodland, carpeted with dying ochre-tinted bracken, the undergrowth all a tangle with bramble vines, their leaves glowing dully. Wet rides, where horses' feet sank squelching into an ooze of mud, led through the wood. It was a pretty draw, as hounds came working through, but one at which the field gathered into groups laughing, talking, without much hope of sport. Foxes were almost too plentiful there. There was Tally Ho back and Tally Ho for'ard; endless chorus of hounds; endless gallops from end to end, but very little chance of a hunt. Ambitious spirits galloped with the hounds, shoving through lacing twigs, bending low under heavier branches; quieter people gathered about the main earth and stood there, letting the chase circle round them. Moira and Eva, of course, drove the hirelings to every holloa; Kathleen

was restrained by her friend Malone, who bade her stand with him by the burrow, and then when the hounds "had one cot," they would go on to a good covert.

As they galloped, and checked, and waited in the crowd, the chill signs of unfriendliness were no longer to be doubted. The Ballydare people were clearly turning polite backs upon them. When Moira, wedged in a gateway, spoke to Mrs. O'Brien, who was wedged by her, that usually kindly lady answered, but answered in the abstracted tones of one who does not mean to continue a conversation. Mrs. Vereker's bow would have made ice look torrid, and the Knoxes were not out hunting, for they had been summoned away to a sick daughter; so the Considines' one friend was gone. Unwitting of offence, there seemed to be nothing to do but take things philosophically; to laugh and talk with the men who came to speak to them, and try to ignore the coldness about them. Perhaps it was the custom of a strange hunt to treat newcomers like this. Woman's spiteful nature found some slight comfort in flaunting up and down rides with Captain Milton—his humour was a thrusting one upon the flat—and whisper to him under the baleful glances of Miss Nellie O'Brien, who had considered him her property a month before. It was something when hounds were at fault to have an admiring circle about you, even if every one talked a little loudly and forgot they had come to hunt. Malone's hirelings were docile and well-mannered, well fed, and keen to go; they were charming rides after the eccentricities of Gog and The Star. Yet, had they known it, there were many of the Ballydare people who found it difficult

not to be kind. Eva's gentle face was a winning one; there was no look of the barmaid ancestry hinted at by Mrs. Vereker in her quiet bearing, and if Moira talked too much she too looked like a lady, and was charmingly pretty. But the cruel poisoned tongue had done its work. There was no hope of hunting in Cloneen wood. So Violet Vereker rode from group to group, commencing to talk about some trivial thing, and ending up with the Considines.

"These little adventuresses come husband-hunting" —this to Mrs. O'Brien, who had three daughters and wanted no rivals—"sparing no pains to find one, with the soldiers there all day and half the night bridge-playing, larking; some men are caught by that kind of thing. The sooner, dear Mrs. O'Brien, we show them they will be wise to leave Ballydare the better. They'll soon go when they find no one asks them out."

"There is that Miss Considine making such a row, but one cannot marvel. I hear, poor things, their mother was a barmaid." This to Lady Keene, who, having been an actress herself in her younger days, was desperately particular as to the blueness of her friends' blood. "In a regular brawl the other night at the theatre, down at that Town Hall among the roughs in ball dresses! Can you imagine it! Covered with sham jewels, no doubt. They forced my poor Dennis to go with them, and he got injured defending them. You won't ask them out, will you, dear?"

Then going from girl to girl, rallying them pleasantly. They must look to their laurels now.

Those pretty Miss Considines were absorbing all the men. No one seemed able to resist them; the Ballydare young ladies would be nowhere at any dances this year. Until every girl, tingling wrathfully, determined that her mother should ignore these interlopers.

Mrs. Vereker was a power in the county; she would drive these girls from it. Sitting up straight in her saddle, her handsome face thickly veiled, Mrs. Vereker's cold eyes were often upon Moira. To the depth of a resentful nature she hated the girl, and she could not tell why. Some blind instinct, some fury of jealousy without base or foundation, seemed to whip her on. Eva she disliked for Dennis's sake, feared lest a weak boy should escape her and be tempted into a foolish entanglement; but Moira's bright face stirred every evil instinct in her soul. And Moira, catching the grey eyes fixed upon her, often wondered on her part. The lost note in her memory had not been found. Where had she seen the perfect features, the cold beauty, before? Why, when she looked, did she think of the Hermit, his face set in sadness? She, too, could not tell what made Mrs. Vereker so interesting to her.

This cold-shouldering of the county had another evil effect. Lesser lights, who should not have dared to approach, were now clamouring for friendship. Mrs. Hartigan, the contractor's wife, had called the day before, flaunted her new country residence before them, and bidden them to tea and a hidden-treasure contest. Miss Geoghan, whose seat on a horse went east and west, while her tie went north and south, had long hoped to know what she called "the military."

An acquaintance with the Considines would lead her to her ambition. So she sidled up, smiling, tipping her poor galled horse with a cane, and promising that "me mamma" would call upon the morrow; while Cornelius, her brother, was now quite devoted to Eva. "There's lots of things we might do," gushed Miss Geoghan sweetly. "We play bridge at home now, though, indeed, mamma is apt to revoke, and we have diabolo, an' we'd be delighted to see you." Moira accepted the kindness with reserve. Inexperienced as she was, she recognised the fact that Miss Clara Geoghan was not of her world.

The bustle of the woodland hunt was over at last, the squelching along wet roads and brushing through tangle of lacing boughs came to an end. One little cub who had never left his great leafy home was hunted down and killed. They jogged away, heads bobbing at the hound trot, which, slow as it seems, eats up the miles so quickly.

"Malone says this is Tulla gorse, and we are sure of a hunt." Kathleen came cantering up, little Jim Crow all alert and wiry, arching his neck to her light hand, using himself as if curbs and splints and knocks and old strains were merely spurs to his ambition. "He says there are woeful great banks"—Kathleen pointed to the high green fences—"but you can put these two at anything, and be sure of getting over." Moira rode the black which favoured its foremost legs. Eva was on the hasty grey.

The gorse was on a hillside, dark patches on a swelling green slope; light sunshine touched it as they came up, turning the gorse to silvery green, making the gorse bushes more brilliant in their dark-hued

Tulla gorse. It was here old James had come to and heard the jilted man ride up and speak hot words to Mrs. Vereker. Had she quite forgotten it? Moira looked ahead at the straight, slender back, heard the hard, cold voice speaking to Dennis, who rode beside his mother. Was there no memory of that old day, and the young fiery heart she had murdered? Was it Moira's fancy, or did she see the strong hands tighten suddenly on the reins? Did a spasm of pain contract the handsome face as it was raised to look at the covert? Moira was riding close.

No fancy: twenty-two years had not dimmed the bitterness of the words Mrs. Vereker had heard then.

"We shall find here, I think," she said to her son.

"Sure to." Dennis turned his tinted nose round. "Who was it was talking to-day of the great run they had from here years ago, right across by Knock, up the Dirk hills, and killed in the open running into Durris? Four finished, and some fellow was nearly killed. Twenty years ago now."

"Twenty-two. The year I married. Yes, I remember the run. I finished it one of the four." Mrs. Vereker's complexion seemed borrowed now from her favourite marble figures.

"And the chap who was hurt? He was riding mad, old Knox told me, at wire or some awful place."

"The Castle Crin bounds fence. He was a stranger here." They left the road, and horses cantered up the field.

Moira, listening, had caught the ring of pain in Mrs. Vereker's voice. She did remember, then.

Crash. Hounds dashed in to covert, gluttons for blood, no scampers of their work; they could find as well as drive.

"They're at him." A low note ran its thrill of electricity through the waiting field. Another and another: there was scent in the long patch of gorse.

"Oh! look at him, look." Oblivious of the Master's importance, Kathleen had crept close to Donough Moroney; her fingers in her excitement suddenly gripped his elbow. He turned, looking into the eager, pretty face, his own very thoughtful.

"Quiet—quiet," he said, and smiled quietly. The fox had leapt up upon the bank and turned back again.

"Quiet—quiet, every one, stand still. Don't say a word." A daring fox who meant to go his own way, stepping out right among the horses' legs, threading his quick way among the crowd until he reached the bank edging the field they stood in, and whisked over it. Hounds drove out on his brush, making the echoes ring. He must travel now to save his life.

"One moment. Give them time." Donough Moroney held the field back. Then, "Come along, little lady," he said, turning to Kathleen. And, unaware of the fact that he never spoke to a woman out hunting, she urged Jim Crow in his tracks.

The black hireling might favour his foremost legs; the grey be a trifle hasty; but they were hunters, both of them; it was Moira's and Eva's first experience of riding good horses. Moira's heart rose as the black, without flounder or check, charged lightly on the first narrow bank, and was away; no half

refusals, no mad fly landing him in the ditch outside. Narrow fences, or big walls, or ditches, he was good at them all. Hounds were driving ahead, racing each other for the lead, never at fault, running mute now across the dry, sound pastures. Their point was a little wood some four miles away, a wood where foxes had beaten them before, for there were rabbit holes, which no man could stop, and hounds seemed to know of. They would have blood, if they could, before they got there. It was not a long hunt, but one to live for, across sound land, with perfect, sound fences to be jumped. The wind rushed against heated faces, the good horses strode ahead, unfaltering, seeming to know by instinct where to put their feet, even where the still leafy bramble vines laced across the ditches. Moira's light weight was nothing to the hireling. He carried her well to the front, close to the straining pack, until her eyes were alight with the joy of it all. A little to the left was the Master riding his mare hard, and close to him, pumped, but gallant still, little Jim Crow carrying Kathleen.

All but the well-bred ones might say good-bye to this hunt; the veriest glutton for pace must have been satisfied.

There was a minute's welcome check as cattle foiled the line, only a minute, but it sufficed to allow some clever people who knew a friendly road, and had ridden upon it, to come up—one of them Captain Milton, who, it appeared, had been the victim of shocking luck. He had stopped in the first field to catch a loose horse, and been obliged then to race hard for his place. His horse was, he said, a marvel to have caught them.

Old Melody had it; they had not lost much time.

"And the Dunmore bank has to be taken," said Moroney, with the aspect of a nurse who tempts her charges to eat pills. "It'll settle a few of us now, with our horses dead-beat."

The bank towered before them high and narrow, thickly grown with bush-grass, and with, apparently—as Dennis Vereker, taking it first, disappeared from sight—a chasm outside. Moroney's long-tailed mare raced at it, springing up easily; flying off and beside him with a mighty bound came the redoubtable Jim Crow. "He's a fizzer!" said the Master quickly, looking back. "An' if I was down I was dead," he added gloomily. Dennis Vereker and his mother were over. Moira dashed down at it, Milton by her side. "Go first," she said, with the selfishness of the novice; "it looks rotten there."

Milton looked at her eager face, and looked longer at the towering fence.

"I've dropped my cigarette-case," he said, just as the black hireling sprang upwards gallantly, gathered his feet on the narrow, slippery top, and jumped out across the huge ditch. Moira, looking round with a gasp, saw no more of Captain Milton.

Mrs. Vereker's big bay was showing signs of distress, falling in his stride, lathering; and it seemed fate once more that as the hounds broke from scent to view with a sudden mad chorus of triumph, Malone's black hireling should stride past the high-priced weight-carrier, beating him for pace.

The sun shone out, touching the world to gold. It was glory for all save the poor tired fox, straining his failing limbs to reach the haven so near him.

Yet the end, as his heart seemed bursting and his body lead, was swift and merciful. A wave of pied death closed upon him—one last brave snarl, an impotent snap, as Melody and Merriment closed upon him, then a little tattered brown thing, which had raced for life and lost it. Men flung themselves from panting horses; the tail, the ever-happy tail, which is content to gallop in each other's tracks and never see a hound, came straggling up. They had avoided the well-known bank, getting round by a longer way.

Milton, swearing at his cigarette-case, appeared with them. Yet in quiet tones, away from the others, he described to Moira how his horse had jumped the mighty fence as though it were a mere stone-gap.

"She's a wonder," he said, patting the mare's wet neck.

Malone, whose youngster had put him down three times, appeared at this moment. His hat was broken, he was plastered with mud, and absolutely happy. "The four-year-old," he declared, "was worthy of any man."

Milton, getting off, was unwise enough to scoff at the muddy coat and again to praise his own brown mare. It so happened that he wanted to sell her.

Malone, now stroking the grey four-year-old, said, "Surely the brown was a grand mare entirely. And, God's providence, she has thim fine, hard feet on her," he added thoughtfully, looking pensively at the road, along which several late arrivals were still coming.

Milton assumed the hue of a red rose, and turned muttering away.

"But—he couldn't help being late; he stopped to catch a horse," said Moira, expostulating.

"'Twas handy for him," said Malone dryly. "Mighty handy."

Miss Clara Geoghan, appearing coyly, furthered her hopes of friendship by saying, "'Twas a grand hunt altogether. And I could see Moira dashin' like the wind ahead of them all."

Miss Geoghan's smiling face represented the heart of a beet in colour; her tie was now adjusted at the back of her neck, and her black curls fell limply across a streaming brow. But her smile was never-ending; it curved her lips with a determination more wearing than tears. With a further promise as to "me mamma's" visit, and some allusion to a taste of a sore back the little horse had from the roller in his stable, she rode off homewards.

"An' her father servin' in his own shop five years back," said Malone easily. "There's changes in the times, Miss Moira, since me own mamma was young."

Eva, whose hasty grey had not proved quite fast enough, was talking to Dennis. She was sheltered by a thorn hedge, and Mrs. Vereker had gone out upon the road to seek luncheon, so that for the moment he was safe.

Eva, whose mind was fully innocent of anything except kindness, asked him to come and see them.

Dennis peered round the thorn hedge, and promised dubiously for Saturday. The pretty face drew him when he was with it; his fear of his mother's anger cooled his love when he was at home. Weak, vacillating, he scarcely knew which way he wanted to choose to go.

His boy's fancy had been touched, but his mother's will, iron and dominant, governed him more completely than any light love he could feel.

"I'll come soon," he said uncertainly. "When I can get away."

Eva, smiling a little at his anxious glances, realised the situation. It was only to Moira that the red-faced boy was haloed about with the world's riches and the splendour of his country home.

"I am afraid your nose caused you some trouble," she said with a smile.

Dennis stroked the tinted feature regretfully, thought of his mother's furious entrance to his room with the Ballydare paper in her hand, and said it undoubtedly had.

"We ought not to have gone," he burst out petulantly. "It was ridiculous of us. Just a place for the town crowd. Nice joke it was for me next day, especially as I told my mother I was dining at barracks."

"I scarcely see the necessity for that," said Eva, quietly contemptuous, riding out to join the now moving crowd. As many of such brilliant beginnings, the day wound to a disappointing close. It clouded over, a thin cold rain fell steadily, drifting down coat collars, soaking into knees and elbows, until riders and horses were chilled and depressed—at Crewchurch, the next draw, a ringing fox led them in ceaseless circles, until the fences were scarred from pounding hoofs, and broken and crumbled into slimy gaps—the kind of evening when one takes a really bad fall over a fence you have jumped safely five times, and then feel a fool for having done it.

It was a long ride back to Ballydare when all was over; they left their fox in the darkness, having beaten them by his cowardly tactics. They were tired from the morning's good gallop; the black hireling moved stiffly, and the grey was a little lame. Perfect as the horses had been, the three guineas to be paid for them now gathered to a mountainous sum. Aunt Martha's legacy was melting over fast, and the great return they had expected was growing dim and nebulous. The sky was grey and dreary, lines of dark hedges looming faintly against the evening gloom.

Two girls who got stiffly from their horses in the yard at The Beeches were depressed and unhappy, and it was only little Kathleen who sang as she went in, trilling in a tuneful little treble one verse of a hunting song.

"There's the Master in boots," lilted Kathleen, until Moira, who felt the "Dead March" in *Saul* would be far more to her mood, grumpily inquired if they thought he would go out in slippers, and also that it was the doctor, and so stopped the song.

James Dunne, who had found something else to do, was plucking plover for their dinner, raining the feathers down into a sheeny heap of grey and green, and wondering as he did so that any one should care to eat them wild birds, when they could get a good bit of bacon for the money.

"There's substhance in a bit of mate," he said reproachfully, "an' ye'd know the pig is afther livin' on good male an' pyates; but thim birds, what flesh is on thim is just worrums and wather, divil a ha'porth more."

The remark made to Moira failed to improve her appetite. They gathered about the fire after dinner, as they had done on the night of their arrival, but without the high hopes which had fired them then.

"What"—Eva poked recklessly at the blazing coals—"what if, after all, it's a failure, and we go back to Borrisdeane, all our money gone?" Moira said sharply that, even if the money was gone, many things might happen before the winter was over, her mind's eye travelling as she spoke to Castle Knock. "When The Star fattens again, I shall get all I hoped to for her," she asserted stoutly, "and so will you for Gog, Eva."

"When his legs go down," said Eva dolefully. "It's very well to feel hopeful, Moira; but I really believe the Hermit was right after all, and we should have stayed quietly at Borrisdeane."

"Oh, bother the Hermit," stormed Moira, and went to bed.

The day's hunt unfortunately bore fruit in the arrival next day of Mrs. and the Misses Geoghan, driving an old brown horse in what they called the "phayeeton."

The two young women, the second a buxom maiden of some twenty-two years, who was called Baby Julia and wore her hair down her back in a fat and beribboned pigtail, were even fuzzier as to fringes and ties than they were out hunting.

They introduced "me mamma" effusively, but with a visible desire to repress that lady from all speech. They admired everything they saw, and kept restless eyes upon the window for the arrival of the officers they desired to meet.

Now, the Considines lacked the experience to snub these unwelcome visitors. With no absolute certainty of the Geoghans' social standing, they did not like to be unkind to any one in a new county. Perhaps people here were different; so they accepted the gush and praise as a welcome change from the iciness of Mrs. Vereker, and were even led into a promise of visiting Bracken Hall on the following Friday for a little party of tea and games.

Baby Julia announced proudly that they played bridge. She had won threepence last Wednesday week. Also diabolo——. Here she stopped suddenly.

Then the visitors suddenly grew cheerier, and settled down for the afternoon. Captain Milton and Mr. Cromartin were announced. Now at last they could meet and invite the military.

"And diabolo," went on Miss Baby Julia, after they had inclined their touzled heads to the introduction. "Did y' ever play it now, Captain? The queer kind of game it is. The spool was like to whip the nose from me lasht Sunday. Miss Clara said 'twas the price of me for missin' Mass."

Moira and Eva found themselves talking to "me mamma," who was exceedingly timid and only discursive, for some hidden reason, on the subject of turkeys and the respective merits of single and double breasts; while Clara and Baby Julia plunged in the joys of ardent flirtation, as expressed by expressive eyes, giggles, tosses of touzled heads, and many "Now, Captain, d'ye say so? Ah, go on with your nonsense now, turning Baby's head," and so forth.

It is to be feared that the drawing out of the Miss Geoghans was entirely to Milton's taste. A nicer man would have let them alone; he proposed to make the mess roar that night as he described them. They ate their tea coyly, with crooked little fingers and a lavish use of pocket-handkerchiefs on their laps.

"The grease'd destroy you," Baby Julia remarked as she engaged on a hot cake.

An invitation for Friday was accepted by Milton and declined by Cromartin, who had come to talk over the hunt and not flirt with the Geoghans. His mental resolve was not to come again if he met these people.

The Geoghan girls waxed discursive and far too lively. Miss Clara was embalmed in alluring giggles, and tried to wrest Baby Julia's conquest from her, which, that young lady resenting, there was very nearly a distinct quarrel when it came to "the captain" helping them on with their cloaks; Miss Clara finally succeeding, by right of age, in receiving his aid. Baby Julia, huffily getting into hers alone, retaliated by sweetly saying, "She'd have to hunt alone next meet, for Clara" (she pronounced it "Claara") "had the withers worn out of the grey mare. The poor animal'd bow to the ground with the pain if you lay a hand on her," said Baby Julia plaintively, and avoiding her sister's baleful eye. "Isn't Claara misfortunate, Captain, the way she sits skew ways on a horse?"

Eva looked thoughtful when the visitors had all left.

"Surely we ought not to know those people," she

said. "They are very impossible, even if other people will have none of us."

"They talk of a big place; they've got horses, and hunt. I suppose they are all right," said Moira dubiously; "one cannot be uncivil to people in a strange place."

"And there is that red-headed brother who haunts me," said Eva; "if we go there it will be worse. Oh, I wish the Hermit was here; he would know."

"It's always the Hermit," said Moira crossly, and going away.

CHAPTER XIII

A GAY AFTERNOON

THE Dare, running smoothly and decorously through the little town of Ballydare, breaks to a riot of beauty just below it, swirls past wooded banks, over mossy rocks, round little islands. The Considines, having done a morning's shopping, walked on by the well-worn path and sat down at last, lost in watching the river. November as it was, leaves still clothed many of the trees; leaves afire with autumn's glory. The river seemed to run on endlessly to the grey skies; smooth flow of deep green in the shadows, with just a dimple of movement on its surface, until suddenly the jutting rocks churned it into foam; then a roar of troubled waters, a froth of white and translucent brown, all among the slabs of stone, until again it broadened to a wide lake of silver-grey and green and brown, stately now, gliding proudly, with an island, leaf-jewelled, set in its midst. There were no floods as yet; the rocks were to be seen, russet brown, deepening to dull red if a gleam of sun touched them, spotted with green where the stones had stayed dry through the summer. And always the murmur, the endless whisper of the waters,

as they passed, as human lives slipping to the sea of eternity. Sunshine, and the river woke to it, flung out its limbs to the golden finger, rippled joyously, its foam white as wool; then the sky would darken, the wind come chilly with a moan of rain in its breath, and the river, ever changeful, melted to cold tints, till the white foam leapt, bitter white, against the grey-black of the water.

Eva—the early winter day was warm as summer in the shelter of the trees—sat with her face on her hand, her thoughts far away. Moira's were nearer home.

Nothing was as it should be. No part of this trip had turned out as she had hoped. The Star had come out again, but sickness had not broken her spirits; she had flown her banks and fallen into ditches with as much resolution as ever. Then, growing a little blown, had refused resolutely, and all but brained a friendly countryman who came to beat her over.

"If I was a foot nearer I'd be a dead corpse walking home this night," he said with some asperity. "Ye'd see the white ov her eye comin' round to measure the distance, an' then she let out for me head. Wait a while now till I gets to me cyart."

He retreated to the road for his whip, and The Star tasted the bitter fruits of retaliation, practised by an enemy who could keep out of striking distance. With a scream of rage she jumped at last, but this kind of thing did not keep one in a run. Moira, getting out on to a road, saw the hunt sweep over a hill two miles away. The Star was scarred by

the lash, and in a furious temper. She reared at the next cross-roads, declining to follow a track which would have led her near the hounds. With a certainty, cold as ice and clear as crystal, Moira realised that her purchase would never make a hunter. As for Gog, one could always see him at least two fields behind every one else, pounding away steadily.

This failure resulted in another day's hiring, and consequently a further payment of three guineas to the smiling Malone. The Star again suffered from neurasthenia, and utterly declined food.

Patsy, now a pronounced misanthrope, said she was as bad as a woman to manage, and spent his days proffering her cunning mixtures of bran and flaxseed tea and crushed oats, which she generally upset all over him.

Horses were not all; there was the social point of view. The Geoghans were very easy to get to know and very difficult to get rid of. The Considines' house at tea-time meant that they would meet the military, so, Baby Julia and Miss Clara—never called Miss Geoghan, because there was an elder sister, now in a convent—ran in at all hours. Now they came with books, now with messages from mamma; and neither Eva nor Moira was strong-minded enough to send them away.

Mrs. Haviland's kindness was not proof against constant meeting of Geoghans. She ceased coming so often; the nicer men, too, stayed away, and only the younger ones who liked to lark with Clara and Baby Julia filled the little drawing-room.

"Moira"—Eva raised her head and pulled out a cheque and account-book—"how much money do you think we've spent?"

"The Star, and Gog, and Jim Crow"—Moira calculated rapidly—"and the rent. I suppose over two hundred pounds, Eva."

"Nearer five," said Eva quietly; "over four, certainly. I can't keep it down. The horses seem to swallow hay and straw and oats wholesale; for Patsy says what The Star doesn't eat she spills; and there was the rent and saddles and clothes and practically new stables. Aunt Maria's legacy will barely see us through the winter, Moira, and then. . . . And then if the horses are not sold, well—a return to Borrisdeane, plus our new saddles, habits, and many new dresses, and minus an income of thirty pounds, which would have done much to keep us. It is really appalling." Eva put away her books. "Money just flies here. I paid ten pounds to Callaghan, the grocer, to-day. I paid fifteen for forage. Oh, Moira, why didn't we listen to the Hermit, and why isn't he here?"

"He'd just croak all day," said Moira gruffly. Then her ever-hopeful fancy leapt to the sunshine of the future. Was Eva blind not to see that all would have been well spent if she and Dennis Vereker were married? They could stay with her every winter; hunt from there. Eva would be so rich, she could help them.

"You never look at the bright side," said Moira buoyantly. "Wait until I get The Star fat; wait until——." She nodded a wise head. "We must

succeed. I'm not going back to Borrisdeane to have the Hermit triumphing at me."

"He won't be there," said Eva. "Biddy heard last night. The Hermit is going away."

"Oh-h," said Moira slowly.

He had said so himself, but Moira had scarcely believed it. The river seemed to grow colder, to menace her with grim, black waters. No Hermit to quarrel with. The old white house shut up; the woods perhaps preserved by some strangers. The boom of the heavy sea sounded in her ears, she could smell the salt wind, and the peat, and heather; see the dim looming hills which they had passed by to gain the world. And they called to her—these things. The waters of the lake had never menaced her there. There were no fears about money in those old peaceful days. Aunt Maria provided, and they were clothed and fed. There were always chickens, and eggs, and milk, and they seemed to want but little more.

Moira sighed deeply; even her buoyant temperament was not proof against these thoughts. Then, feeling thus, she grew angry and burst into one of her old day-dreams—of all it was to see life, and what they would make of the horses, and countless other things which she knew not to be true.

"I wonder"—Eva got up, for it was time to go home—"I wonder, Moira, if the Geoghans, and Captain Milton, and all the row we make are quite life. I often wonder."

Moira stumped off with her pretty nose in the air. "Don't forget there are people coming for bridge,"

she said. "Have you ordered sardines for sandwiches, and soda water, and whisky, and everything?"

Eva observed somewhat peevishly that she had done so. Also that they owed Captain Milton fifteen shillings, and she must cash a small cheque and not forget to pay him.

On their way back through the town they met Dennis Vereker. He was alone, and immediately suggested walking back with them. Moira's spirits flew to fever point. She raced to the butcher's for chops, and fled home first, moving Biddy to extreme anger by her demand for cutlets and sweets at a moment's notice.

"There was a bit of cold turkey," she said. "That should have been enough for ye all. I declare, I might as well be cook for a regiment." Here she directed James Dunne, who, needless to say, had turned up for his dinner, to beat eggs and boil milk, and wished, with all the fervour of her lonely old soul, that they were back again at Borrisdeane.

"I'd rather have the old missus scoldin' me," she said, as she bustled, "than all the fine things I have to do here."

The party at the Geoghans' had fallen through, been adjourned to that afternoon. Baby Julia wished to make a finer affair of it than they had intended to at first, and they dressed with the faintly bitter knowledge that it was, so far, the only entertainment they had put on their plumes and silken skirts for.

The roan horse had to be hired, for one could

not walk through the mud, and he elected to-day to stop but once, choosing the chance to upset an unsuspecting fat woman going home from market, who vanished backwards over a low bank, screaming to the Virgin with all the strength of her lungs.

Bracken Hall did not lack pretension. It was a big, square house, painted a lively red, with a great stucco porch disfiguring it, a species of white spot of eczema on an over-coloured face. Greenhouses had been put on off the drawing-room, safely excluding all fresh air, and admitting a soothing reek of wet mould and steam. There never seemed to be any flowers. Baby Julia told them the gardener was always after the horses, which perhaps was the reason.

Milton and Cromartin had promised to meet them. They were asked into a wide hall, chiefly adorned with moth-eaten pieces of foxes, and hung with oleographs, and, having had their names blared forth by the maid, who, in her haste, had forgotten to remove some of her leaden hair-curlers, they came upon a motley gathering of finely dressed young women, and straggling youths with bright ties, who hailed from various offices.

Tea was magnificent. Baby Julia and Clara had studied papers for the week. They had read that sandwiches were smart ; and there were piles of them, thick and solid, beef and chicken and ham, with smears of mustard and chutney. Milton took one, and said, " My God " to himself several times. There was tea and champagne—Papa Geoghan did not

lack money—and gaudily iced cakes, very fine without and dry within.

Baby was a vision in pale green silk, and open-work stockings which did not match. Clara was in blue. Their moment of triumph dawned when they saw the two soldiers come in.

There was a game after tea—hidden treasure—when one took ends of long threads and unentangled them hurriedly to gain a prize for the first completed—very fine prizes: a silver box and a cigarette case. Much ingenuity had marked the winding of those threads. They were tied round banisters, and under rugs, about chairs; and one scrambled, and unwove, and collided with fellow-strugglers, sometimes on one's knees and sometimes standing. Milton was paired with Clara; Cornelius, wonderfully clad in green flannels, with a gentle line of red in the pattern, of course took Eva, and was not pleased when, declining all dual searchings, she merely directed while he worked, his admiring remarks being curbed by the necessity of grovelling on his knees for his thread. Moira received a limp youth, who was quite devoid of enterprise, and said, "D'ye think so now? My, my, isn't it troublesome?" as they came to each tangle. He was hot and tired when Moira had finished with him. It was a game which elicited many squeaks, and "Give over nows," and "Have dones," from the finely dressed young women.

Miss Clara seemed unable to find out anything unless she poked her tangled head very close to Milton's. Her squeaks of "Captain, here now. Come

on, Captain, we have it," could be heard above all the other ones.

Their string, a long one, seemed singularly easy to unravel; so much so, that they were miles ahead of every one, when Baby Julia, appearing radiantly with Cromartin behind her, proudly held out the little knot which announced they had reached the end.

"We have it won," she said, smiling.

Miss Clara, on her knees by the curtain, arose in sudden wrath—she was just winding in her knot of red thread.

"I declare to heavens you broke it, Baby Julia," she declared furiously as she rose; and Baby Julia said nothing. But the light of triumph in her eyes was not a holy one. Their announcement that all the others must try on, as they themselves would not take the ladies' prize, kept the room busy. Tempers grew thin in the scramble, and the fine young women grew less fine as they toiled for victory.

"That's me string, Miss Casey, if you please. 'Tis unfair, I tell you. I had me hand on the chair as you pulled it from me. Ah! Oh, hurry, Mr. Quin, what use are you at all?"

Moira had so terrified her limp youth that his eyes seemed possessed of second sight; they were an easy third, and she received the silver box as her reward.

More champagne and sandwiches were necessary after this, flanked this time by the appearance of papa himself with a steaming bowl of punch, which he pressed upon his guests.

"The only thing for the stomach," he said genially, "after champagne."

Papa would take no refusal; he selected the two soldiers as special recipients of his hospitality, until Milton's nose warmed to a fiery hue, and his tales of prowess with hound and gun grew with each sip.

Baby Julia, the light of triumph still gleaming in her eyes, appeared at Moira's side. She affected a girlish friendship, and squeezed Moira's arm playfully.

"Have a drop of punch, now," she said. "Do, my dear Miss Considine. Wasn't it fun?" she added. "Wasn't Clara fit to be tied? You see, she had it all settled for herself and the captain to win; for the red string wasn't tied anywhere, only wound about a while. But I was up to her, and I sent Mr. Cromartin away for a candle, pretending I couldn't see one place, and I whipped out me scissors and cut the whole thing, and told him then I'd got the end found. Clara won't come over me so easy," said the Baby, tossing her tangled head, and sipping punch. "Aren't they lovely men, the military?" she added in a whisper, her eyes fixed upon Milton, who, rapidly melting to a backboneless benevolence, and taking more punch to reduce it, was now informing Miss Clara, papa, and a circle of young ladies, how, when hunting in Leicestershire, he had crossed a river in flood, his horse changing on a coal barge in the centre, and left the whole field behind. Even the hounds, it would appear, had crossed by a bridge.

Cromartin, with anxious eyes, was endeavouring to remove his senior officer.

It was time for all to say good-bye. Surrounded by loving Geoghans, who invited themselves to tea, and made many arrangements for unbroken friendship, the Considines were at last allowed to depart.

At their last sight of Captain Milton, they observed that he had got papa by both hands, and was pressing him to dine at mess next day—every day—hospitality was not confined to Irishmen.

"Yes, he must come—immediately, and he'd tell him about a hunt."

"Oh, for God's sake, come away," said Cromartin, wheeling his captain round and piloting him to the fresh air, where he sat upon the steps of a carriage, and groaned because the sandwiches had disagreed with him.

"The punch disagreed with you," said Cromartin, with bitterness, as papa, speeding the parting guest, withdrew his bald pate, and remarked that the English hadn't the heads of feathers. "A few glasses of champagne, and a few spoons of good punch," said papa indignantly. "I declare I'd only be getting thirsty on that same, and the captain is outside with the place wheeling round him."

Moira and Eva fled hurriedly, their first ideas of offering sympathy being cut short by Cromartin's last terse remark.

"It—it must have been the sandwiches," said Moira, as they got on to the car; and the roan horse ran backwards with praiseworthy energy. Having taken several chips out of the stucco porch, he elected to start at a gallop, striking the carriage which Milton still sat on with a jar which brought

that gentleman to his sulky feet, still denouncing the sandwiches.

"Bad," he said unevenly, "raw ham. Ptomaine poisoning. See doctor."

"Punch poisoning," said Cromartin, with emphasis. "There was a bottle of Chartreuse in it, and another of brandy. I saw him put them in."

No one felt very well after the Geoghans' party.

The constant need for the roan horse inspired James Dunne with the idea that it would not be a bad thing for his young ladies to have one of their own. He could, he thought, easily convert a tumble-down shed into another stable, and a friend of his had a black five-year old which would be the very thing. The details of trap and harness did not trouble him. He made his suggestion the morning after the Geoghans' party, and it was backed up ten minutes later by the arrival of a black horse, driven in a yellow dogcart which had forgotten what paint looked like.

Eva's protests as to not wanting a trapper were drowned for a time.

"The grandest sthepper he is, as gentle as a lamb." Dundon, the owner, drove the black about the little lawn with loose reins and a trusting air. "Ye might be lookin' Ireland for his like in harness. I did but plough and car him, but whin James here tould me, I was away next morning to me uncle's first cousin, that I knew had a fine thrap. An' then, Denny O'Hagan bein' dead, it just suited, for we wint off to the funeral, an' while the corpse was waitin' in the chapel, meself an' a couple of fellows dhruv up an'

down the road to see if the horse would be fit for a lady."

Even this burst of eloquence was in vain. Eva could not see her way to more purchases of horse-flesh. Moreover, even her unsuspicious eyes saw marks upon its knees, and doubted the soundness of a hind leg; she was more sceptical than when she purchased the mighty Gog.

James Dunne, on observing her disfavour, veered with the swiftness of a weathercock, rested a suddenly keen vision on several defects, and whispered advice concerning the advisability of sticking to the roan hireling.

"Sure, afther all, if he did hurt ye, he's not yer own," said James wisely. "Ye wouldn't have to sell him aftherwards, an' that's a great matther." He engaged in a whispered conversation with Dundon, in which it is to be feared that his wish to please made him cast many aspersions on the lack of judgment possessed by young ladies. A "glass" was offered, and swallowed with unwinking and unwatered joy by the black's owner, and Eva went back to the fire.

Biddy, laden with coal, was making it up, and grumbling at the cost. "Ye'd want a well o' gould down here, Miss Eva," said the old woman unhappily. "'Tisn't at all like Borrisdeane; an' there's not one of ye enjoying yerselves but little Miss Kathleen. I saw her yesterday evenin' walking up the street with the dogs' masther, as happy as ye plaze—an' a quare little atom of a man he is, too." Biddy, with grimy black fingers, reft a letter from the bosom of her shawl. "Misther Tremayne's gone," she said. "I had a

letter this mornin'; James read it to me." This suggested that James was again a visitor for dinner, and had possibly come to breakfast. "He's away from Borrisdeane, Miss Eva; left there three days ago—he and his man—and no one knows whin he'll be back. Vo! Vo! 'tis bad times," said Biddy sadly; "an' old Strawberry goin' to have her calf in February, too! Oh! Miss Eva, if I could be back to milk her. That was milk there; not the stuff ye gets here. Oh! Miss Eva, if we could but go home."

"I imagine," said Eva grimly, "that we shall go there soon, Biddy, riding the horses because we can't afford to pay for the tickets."

"Glory be to God," said Biddy. "Ye wouldn't get me upon one, Miss Eva."

A visit from Captain Milton and Baby Geoghan filled up the afternoon. Miss Clara was out at a party.

"Fairly mad she is, my dear," babbled Baby Julia, with innocent joy. "She had her mind made up, Captain, for you to win the case, went down an' bought it, and asked the price of initials, no less; and indeed, I got behind you over it when she wouldn't let me and you hunt together."

Here Baby Julia's smile was wide enough to have swallowed a whole continent of hearts, and the rattle of jewellery was as the clinking of curb-chains at a meet.

"You were off too early," added the Baby. "We had the rugs up, and set a tune on the musical-box and danced till eleven. Oh! 'twas great fun altogether. Signs by, 'twasn't all as we'd like, for

Maggie Dayly reddened Denny Quin's face with the smack she gave him when he kissed her on the stairs; and he came to papa, near to agony. When you'd go as far as that, you might let clouting alone," said Julia philosophically, her beaming eyes on Milton.

That gentleman, rather depressed by his over-enjoyment of punch, had come to suggest taking Moira down to a meet of the Cloneen staghounds next day. They would go and come back by train, and he would lend her a horse. Villiers and Cromartin were going, possibly the Havilands. It would be great fun, and a ride over a glorious country.

"And lots of it on the road," said Baby Julia irrelevantly, but the tail of her beaming eye dwelt on Milton. "I went once, and we pasted the roads all day. I wore the hoof off papa's grey colt—— and, oh, papa"—her tongue was irrepressible—"papa hopes he didn't knock the head off you with the punch, Captain. It's a way he has of making it strong, if you wouldn't be used to it. Jimmy Mack said you were sitting on the carriage steps."

With extreme stiffness and a high colour, Captain Milton remarked that the sandwiches had disagreed with him and made him giddy. He was still, he said, quite afraid that something had been wrong.

"Not a blessed thing," said the Baby, too young to see how she had put her foot in it. "The meat was from Donovan's, and he only kills papa's and Lord Clargrainey's."

Milton thought that a man may desire to murder a buxom young woman with touzled hair and inviting eyes. He took tea with offended dignity, and devoted himself to Moira, talking of the morrow. Bluebeard, his horse, would carry her splendidly; they would have a great day. Moira was carried away by the idea, and oblivious of the effect which Baby Julia had upon Mrs. Haviland when she came to call once again.

The fat lady froze to a social iceberg, beaten about on all sides by the steel-proof prow of Baby Julia's desire for friendship, as that young person, perceiving nothing wrong, invited the major's wife to tea, declared she and mamma would call; and, finally, nearly drove poor Mrs. Haviland crazy by waiting upon her assiduously when tea commenced.

The new parlourmaid, it appeared, was a friend of Baby's, and was hailed by a pleasant "How are you, Mary?" when the brass tray was carried in.

"We had that one once," said Julia, as she dispensed the Considines' hospitality for them; "but she did papa's evening shoes with black lead, and gave him sauce when he ate the face off her, so she had to go. A nice sort of a girl, too. She can cut the cards finely." Baby plied Mrs. Haviland with hot cakes and bread-and-butter, and said, "My, but for a stout woman you eat nothing!" when her overtures were declined.

"Isn't it funny, that eating?" she said. "I could do with a goose, an' there's no flesh on

me; an' there's Claara, that only pecks, draggin' her stays harder every week not to let on that she's getting stouter. I declare you'd hear them groaning often."

Mrs. Haviland rose, visibly disgusted.

"Some day, when you are alone, my dear," she said to Eva, who pressed her to come soon. "I am busy at present. To-morrow the Verekers give their afternoon, and Thursday the Lloyds; Friday's a hunt, and the Butlers' dinner and dance. It's quite gay."

Quite gay! and the girls who had come so far for gaiety were not bidden to anything. Eva grew pink as she listened; Moira bit her lip. These were the things they had hoped for—the little back stream of life which ran at Ballydare—and it was denied to them. Pretty dresses, plumed hats, languished in their cardboard prisons—so far, only put on once or twice.

"They don't ask us," she said with a wry little smile. "Mrs. Vereker doesn't like us; I don't know why."

Mrs. Haviland looked eloquently at Baby Julia. She was too mild and kind a woman to say what was in her mind. She looked also at Eva's semi-theatrical dress and elaborately tired hair, at the haze of smoke, the decanters and glasses brought in after tea, to save Milton the trouble of helping himself in the dining-room, and her lips grew tighter.

Perhaps Mrs. Vereker was right, and the girls were fast and foolish by design—a mere bevy of little adventuresses, come down to seek for a husband from

the Midshire Regiment. It must, after all, be her last visit.

"I could come in on a Sunday, if you weren't busy," said Eva.

Mrs. Haviland regretted—coldly now—but she would be out.

Eva's pink cheeks faded to white ones. She knew Mrs. Haviland was never out on Sundays, and she had often gone in there to escape from the racket in the little drawing-room at The Beeches. Moira was determined to accept merriment as life, if she could have nothing else Noise passed for smartness to an unsophisticated mind.

As Mrs. Haviland left Dennis Vereker appeared, and stayed for a short time. He was on his way home from hunting. Dennis was clearly depressed; he stared at Eva in a puzzled way, and stroked his red face with his hands as he did so. Some glimmering of the right to decide for himself which should have been his was evidently troubling him.

Moira, very pretty in brilliant yellow, with a string of Aunt Maria's seed pearls about her round throat, grumbled in undertones to Milton.

"It's his mother," she said, nodding at Dennis. "From the day we let out her prize sheep she has disliked us. I don't know why people don't ask us to all their parties."

"Oh, because you're such good fun and good sorts, and so jolly," said Milton easily. "These old fossils at Ballydare don't understand your being plucky enough to come and live here alone."

His round pale blue eyes repressed the fact that he, Lancelot Milton, approved of it, and therefore that it was all right, and she need not worry.

"Plucky of you, I call it," he said; "getting away from that wretched hole in Kerry. Of course, the old cats don't approve of you. You're all a hang sight too pretty, for one thing."

Moira eyed him doubtfully. She could not imagine the Hermit telling her that she was a "hang sight too pretty" in that tone. It was a voice which implied good fellowship of so easy a class that Moira wrinkled her brows and longed for worldly wisdom.

"I don't see how any one could object to our living here—three sisters," she said a little stiffly. "Even Miss Butler said we could. I really often wish," she went on petulantly, "that we had taken the Hermit's advice and never left Borrisdeane."

"Oh, but look at the fun you've had," said Milton, rising and patting his tie before the narrow glass above the fireplace.

"Yes, look at it," said Moira, without enthusiasm, her eyes upon a muff which Baby Julia had left behind her.

"And the people you've met," said Milton, carefully adjusting a tiny curl which he permitted himself just at one side of his parted hair. His increasing baldness was a sad trial to him, and he spent a large sum upon lotions for the hair.

"And the people we've met," repeated Moira, with

still less enthusiasm, as she held out her hand to meet his.

"To-morrow, then," said Milton. "10.25. It will be great fun. Don't cut my horse's back, like a good girl." He went off absolutely satisfied that the wide world held no man whose acquaintance was a greater boon than that of Lancelot Milton.

"Only kind to be nice to 'em," he said to Vereker, as he was given a lift back to barracks. "Real jolly little things, with no silly nonsense about 'em."

A sudden access of irritability made Dennis wish he could deposit his fellow traveller in the mud.

Kathleen—who had to leave her horse at Malone's and drive with the redoubtable roan—came back late. She was full of the run, and carried a draggled piece of fur in her hand.

"I got the brush," she announced. "Look! I'll have it mounted. Wasn't Mr. Moroney good? He said it was no damn use to any one, and perhaps I might like it."

"That seemed kind," said Eva drily.

"We ran ever so far," prattled Kathleen. "Not very fast; and Malone's grey was splendid. He never made a mistake. There was a huge piece of timber; and there were some banks—oh! high as houses; and once"—Kathleen looked doubtful—"I was following Mr. Moroney, and he fell, and I'm afraid—I'm afraid I gave him a teeny, weeny push, and knocked him over. It was all his stupid horse's fault, pausing on

the bank. I—I cleared him in the ditch," said Kathleen.

"And what did he say?" declaimed Moira, filled with horror.

"He said—as he got up—he said we were a wonderful family," said Kathleen thoughtfully.

CHAPTER XIV

OF DEER-HUNTING AND THE HERMIT

IRELAND smiled on the day Moira Considine went deer-hunting. It was one of the country's moods of defiance, when, laughing softly, she declines to accept winter as her master. "I'll be summer when I choose," she says, and turns the sky to blue, the sun to warm gold; spreads a silver web of gossamer from flower stalk to flower stalk; mocks at the fallen leaves, all brown upon the earth, and stirs them with a wooing breath of sweet west wind. Buds, not dead from nipping frosts, bloom into untimely life, the primroses thrust up pale noses of yellow without fear of the cold, which must come upon them. Even the ground, a maze with the spider threads, seems warm. Winter, worsted for a day or two, lurks grimly in the shadows, putting out chill fingers to touch the mortals who strayed into them, raising sudden little whirls of cold airs, as if in reply to the blaze of defiant sunshine outside—a day on which spirits rose, despite themselves, on which even misanthropes must be glad to be alive, and on which young blood turned to quicksilver, and made young feet dance in their joy.

As Moira drove to the station, even the roan horse

seemed to feel it, for he stepped out freely, champing at his bit, and got them to the train twenty minutes too early, as he had failed to avail himself of the quarter of an hour allowed for stoppages.

"Will I carry him to the 6.40, miss, to meet ye?" demanded James Dunne's friend, whose name was Tom Riordan.

"You will, Tom," said Moira cheerily, removing her bag from the car.

"I'm takin' a friend to a funeral," said Tom thoughtfully, "and if God sind he doesn't sthop too often on the road I'll surely be here. I'll dhrive up for Miss Eva, for she said she'd like to meet ye. 'Tis Martin Dennehys that's dead," he explained further, "a dacent man that has berried three wives, an' that often took a dhrive with meself, so I can't be afther missin' it. An' I declare corpses upsot this divil," he added ruefully. "I had five shillin' to take fat Micky Dundon to bury his a'nt lasht week, an' didn't the scheemer of a horse wheel into the hearse itself, an' kick the coffin out of the min's hands as cliver as any Christian could? Good sphort to ye, miss. Ye'll have a crowd on the thrain."

It was evident that they would. Smiling damsels with gaudy head-gear and many-hued dresses were arriving in scores, a sprinkling of lumpy young men in ready-made shoddy suits and dirty collars amongst them. There were older women with baskets, older men smoking solemnly, a goodly array of priests, all evidently bent upon some trip. It was an excursion to Dublin at some very low rate, and a huge crowd swayed at the ticket office, good-humouredly striving for tickets.

Milton, Stanley, and Cromartin turned up rather late, the Havilands were evidently not coming, and Moira, who knew nothing of training horses, found she had to pay fifteen shillings, a sum which she had to borrow.

As they walked towards the train, they had to fight their way through the crowd. Carriages were crammed, no distinction of class being observed ; and to Milton's lively horror, they found themselves overwhelmed by a wedding party, who thrust the bride and bridegroom into an already overcrowded carriage. The Englishman's sharp expostulations were received with a carelessness which maddened him ; the head porter bade him "be aisy" with friendly patronage ; the ticket collector, further appealed to, inquired sarcastically if he'd "wish to lave dacent people on the platform," and he was finally hushed to a furious silence by his subaltern, who was enjoying it immensely.

"Good-bye, Johanna. Good luck. Good-bye, Peter." A score of dirty hands at the window, and the bridegroom, to support himself, wound an appealing arm about Milton's neck, knocking off that worthy officer's hat.

"No offence, sir," he said pleasantly, bumping back. "No offence."

Johanna, the bride, was a maiden of many summers, decorously dressed in black, enlivened by pink roses in her hat, and further adorned by black kid gloves, with fingers about an inch too long.

"Sit down, Peter. Ye'll be upsot," she said, without emotion.

Peter wiped his face with a large cotton bandana.

His collar was evidently a week-old friend, his hands had not seen water for days, he was years younger than the bride; a man with a pleasantly kind face.

Fears of open amorousness troubled Cromartin, as he glanced at Moira.

"I wonder," said Peter. "I wonder, will he give me the calf for four pound tin, Johanna?"

"I couldn't say," said the bride thoughtfully.

Peter leant forward; he was happily and soberly drunk.

"Jo' Dineen," he said, "is a dacent by—though he had liquor taken to-day. All yer people is dacent, Johanna."

The bride thanked him placidly.

"Ye see we were married this mornin'," said Peter, turning a smiling face upon Moira and Cromartin, who looked sympathetic. "An' we have to shift for ourselves now; 'tis the way of the world. I came over yesterday," he explained, "and I'm taking her home to Tullabram. 'Tis a long journey whin ye wouldn't be used to ways of the line."

Here he found he had no ticket, and was much perturbed.

"I came over by cyar," he said; "and a chaper way, too. Isn't it one an' a pinny ache now to Tullabram? But there's a calf and two pigs back in the cyart, so Johanna was anxious to come this way. Weren't ye, Johanna?"

Johanna, the unemotional, said "Yes."

"We only met yestherday," observed Peter, pulling a bottle from his pocket, "but, faix, we're well satisfied." He pinched one of the kid-gloved hands, which Johanna withdrew coyly. She also refused

his offer of some whisky, though Peter assured her there was "nothin' like a dhrop of dhrink to make the journey jump."

The raw and fiery spirit increased his affability; he beamed upon them all, and held his fellow-travellers by his eloquence. All save Milton, who sat as an offended god, his whole face expressing acute disgust.

"Saw her but yestherday, and all as pleasant as ye'd plaze," said Peter, wiping his mouth. "Faix, we sat up till one, an' divil such a pleasant party ever ye saw. Not so much as a lie passed for the evenin'. Better luck I had than me cousin Mickey Hennessy. They med up a match for him with a giril at Rathdreen, all as nice as ye'd wish, with a cow and three geese and twinty pound in dhry money to come to him; and Mickey's a warm by himself, with a tidy bit of land. Well, he missed the thrain the night before, an' was only there jusht in time to sthart for chapel. Rose Cassidy she was, an' ould Cassidy, her father, was just sittin' her above on a fine side-cyar when Mickey turned up. An' a fine giril she was; a bit thin, Mickey said, but nate an' gintale, with a yally fur around her neck.

"'I thought ye'd be here now,' says old Cassidy, says he. 'Jesht in time, for Father Malone 'ill be waitin'. I'll introduce ye to the others afther,' says he, 'but let ye sit up with Rose now,' says he, 'on the other fall of the cyar.' Well, with that Mickey lights up, 'An' 'tis a fine day,' says he; the signs by he tould me afther 'twas rainin'. 'I reckon 'tis,' says she, with a twisht from Amerikee on her tongue. Well, Mickey takes a look on that, an' he

passed another remark, sayin' 'He was sorry he was late.'

"'I calkerlate it's all the same,' says she, very pleasant; and with that Mickey never says another word till they were foreninst the chapel gate; then he gits down and walks round to where the ould man was tyin' the reins to the gate.

"'Misther Cassidy,' says Mickey, says he, 'ye nivir towld me yere dather was a say rambler, and I won't marry her,' says he. An' what's more he didn't, though they nearly bate him there an' thin, and he had to pay fifty pound whin the case was brought up. 'But 'twas bether,' he said, 'than a foreigner for a wife'; an' that's the way it was betune thim."

Moira and the others, excepting, of course, Captain Milton, laughed merrily. Peter took another drink with a pleased expression, and looked at his wife contentedly.

The train was a slow one, stopping at every station and gathering a fresh crowd of excursionists to its already over-full bosom at each pause. Agitated cries rose from the platforms.

"Get in, Mrs. Hennessy. Ma'am, nivir mind the room. Patsy, Patsy; have ye the tickets? Glory be to God above, Maria is left behind on us. Jump in, let ye. Delia, run to the ass car for me puce scharf; I left it afther me." And so on, until the train lost patience with them, and puffed on its way.

Peter and his bride alighted at Shaneen, the station for their home, bidding every one a somewhat sheepish good-bye. Fresh people rushed in to take their places, until Milton's presence between two fat women was a mere suggestion crowned by a

pot-hat, while across him they talked volubly. Moira, as the lady, had been left some small space.

"Ballytubbert, thank God!" ejaculated Captain Milton, shaking the two old ladies as he plunged to his feet, and rudely interrupting the narrative of a cow which would not fatten.

Getting out was a difficulty, owing to the swarms of people who wanted to get in, and it fell, of course, to Milton's part to be pushed back and urged to keep his place, at least twice, and further that he should emerge at last with the beads belonging to one of his fat neighbours wound about the buttons of his overcoat. The frantic shrieks of the old lady were all but drowned in the bustle, and the train was moving before a heated porter rescued the rosary, reproving Milton as he did so for so basely removing holy beads which carried two precious relics on them.

"She was near to a fit," observed the porter, as the train disappeared.

"Will I unbox the horses for ye, sir?" he said as he returned.

"Now, mind—we've got ten miles to ride, and the last train leaves at six," said Cromartin. "So, if we lose each other, make for this place. If we miss that train, there is no other until two in the morning."

They rode out into a wild green country, fenced almost entirely by big clean banks. Houses were few on the rolling slopes of the hills; it was a grazing country, with rich pastures, lonely on its wild fields. Nothing here to stop hounds or horses; but a hunter must be bold and free to face those yawning ditches: a coward were better at home. The narrow road

wound along the slope of a hill, then dipped to a flat tableland—miles of flat fields and perfect fences, with hints of boggy drains among them.

"One could be lost here and never found again. See, there is not a house for miles." Moira pointed to the expanse of low ground. "How desolate it all is, and yet how splendid!"

"They run for hours at times, I believe; leave every one standing still," said Cromartin. "It takes a racehorse to live with them. See, that is the meet." They were coming to a little village on the brow of a hill; twenty or thirty thatched cabins, squalid and poor, clinging to the slope; one or two half-empty shops, three public-houses. A crowd of men, whose time did not appear to be valuable, were gathered to watch the sport.

The deer-van was drawn up on the road near the meet; the hounds were already there. No white-and-lemon and black-spotted foxhounds, but black and tan, with dewlaps like bloodhounds. There were only a few people at the meet; most of them mounted on blood-horses: nothing without breeding could live with the Knockgreena Staghounds. They were to enlarge into a big field just beyond the village, a slope with a giant rock jutting high in the middle. Woods clustered to the west; below and to the south stretched the green of the pasture-land, unbroken by a scar of tillage.

They gathered by the rock, watching the enlargement. The deer jumped out of his van, looked about him, and then cantered off with his curious lopping gait; the bank and ditch which he seemed to skip over proved to be a formidable obstacle when they

came to it afterwards. Then he stood for a little, nodded his head at the shouting country people, and disappeared from view. And then the hounds came pouring down the field, a sombre wave of eagerness, filling the very heaven with their music. You-ow-ow, the great full-throated notes swelled and echoed, till the poorest heart must beat to the tune. Horses snorted at the sound, sweating from pure excitement, straining at their bits to follow. You-ow-ow. Let any man who has not heard the pack go listen as they fling themselves on the line, for deer-hunting may not be legitimate, but there is no sound like this on earth. On, across the field, below the hill, over the bank, a great mound of green turf with a wide drain at either side, flying now at a pace which meant galloping to live with them. There is no looking for places, except when wire stops the field; each bank is clean and honest, with room for fifty abreast, and even then, straining every nerve, good horses fall behind when the staghounds run hard. Moira could have shouted in her excitement as she heard the burst of music, and drove her borrowed mount to keep with the hounds. But deer are self-willed. The morning hunt was not to be one of those fiery gallops which make men for an hour forget fox-hunting. This particular stag grew bored with running away, and came trotting back to them along the road, utterly declining to go anywhere. When pressed, he cantered down the road, giving horses the battering on the macadam—which, of course, there is sometimes too much of—and then galloped round in small circles, seemingly unafraid of the full-throated chorus at his heels. It was half-

past two when they took him, standing in a boggy ditch.

"If they would only go on," said Moira disconsolately; "the fences are too lovely, and this horse jumps so well."

Cromartin had had a fall; riding wide, he had tumbled in a great ditch, horse and all, and found himself absolutely alone and unable to get out.

"And if the deer hadn't come round again that way, I was afraid I'd be there till they put the cattle out in May," he said ruefully, shaking his soaked coat.

Milton was absolutely enthusiastic. He had remained upon the road, allowing the chase to circle round him; and he thought it was the finest sport in the world.

"Fences to make an old man young," he declared; "though one must sit down to ride at them."

Cromartin made the mental decision that his senior officer must have been standing up all day; but he said nothing.

"We'll come again," said Milton. "I suppose if we ride slowly back now, we shall not be much too early. They'll do nothing more."

But the Master was of another opinion. Horses were fresh, so they enlarged again on a strip of road between two hills. There was no hesitation this time when hounds were laid on. The full, baying notes were fainter, for scent was hot, and there was not so much time for music.

Moira was standing with Milton as the deer went away. She hustled him through the gate and down the field, when the pace and a gap or two tempted

him further. And then riding wide, left of hounds, only Moira with him, he was not only ashamed, but afraid to stop. They were lost in an unknown, hugely fenced country, and when one or two wide banks were thrown behind, he knew he would have to jump them again if he stopped—towering things, which one could have driven a cart along the top of, deep ditches with gleams of cold water offending the timid eye.

How they raced along, the deep notes of the pack echoing through the still air! And race as they would, hounds gained from all except a couple of thoroughbreds.

Moira was enjoying it madly; her blood was on fire as she felt the good horse's stride beneath her, felt the glory of her pace, saw the green country unfold itself beneath the bright sunshine.

They dwelt for a minute, a welcome breather, and then on again, bending to the right, so that Milton and Moira were still more isolated. His horse was blown; his own soul sickened at the chasms he had crossed; and he thought he saw a road, so that instead of following the line of the pack, Milton rode still more to the left, and found a high narrow bank barring his way. He fumbled at his horse's mouth, looked round, heard Moira calling, and set his mount at the fence in the half-hearted way which invites a fall. There was a deep drain outside, one which the horse might have cleared if his head had been left alone, but the sudden nervous grasp on the curb made disaster certain. The two were engulfed in muddy softness, and as Moira got over lower down she saw Milton crawling landwards, while his

poor beast was on its back wedged in the ditch. No one near, no hope or help in the quiet field, the yap, yap of the hounds grew fainter in the distance.

"What on earth are we to do?" said Milton hopelessly.

Moira, riding up and down, thought she saw a stain of smoke on the clear air. It was a case of ropes and help, and she suggested riding until she found a cottage. Milton, devoid of gratitude, nursed his horse's head, to prevent it going under water, and sourly supposed she'd better. Moira tracked the smoke-trail until she got on to a lane, and found a tiny cottage. But there was no man to give aid, only a kindly woman, who wrung her hands with excitement.

"Turned over in the ditch! Vo, vo. D'ye say so now, the craythur? An' ye must have ropes to get him out. Have I a sign of a rope, miss?" The woman paused; then, with a skirl of triumph, she ran towards a small hayrick standing near the cottage, caught up a hay knife which was plunged in it, and rushed at a cart which stood in the yard. There were rope-traces attached to it, which she sawed off, and these, with a pair of rope-reins, were thrust into Moira's hands.

"God sind they'll howld to dhrag him out. God sind it, miss. If ye had but help, and, Mother Mary be praised! here's Danny, me son, home from market."

Danny, a pallid and ill-fed youth, woke to the occasion. He took the ropes from Moira, pointed out a shorter way along a road, and set off at a run.

Moira, trotting in front, thought he was merely crawling.

"Why can't you hurry?" she queried sharply.

"I have spasms," said Danny sourly, checking further comment. Fate at that moment sent them another friend—one Mulligan, driving cattle on the road. Danny swept him to his aid.

"Yer a man, let the cattle off. They'll go asthray or ye? What matther is it, whin there's a horse dhrownding?"

Mulligan immediately left the cattle, and Moira and her helpers hurried to the unhappy Milton. It was no easy task of rescue, but it was accomplished at last. Milton, rubbing his chilled horse, began to wonder how little reward he could give.

Danny was no grasper of payment. He accepted half a crown without a thought of severed traces and broken cart-reins, just as Mulligan, his friend, was oblivious of several hours to be spent in search of his scattered cattle.

Yet Milton's frame of mind was a happy one as they went fast towards the station. Had he not, even if completely against his will, distinguished himself across those terrific fences? That and his fall would be magnified into mighty matters.

"It was really almost unjumpable," he said, as they trotted along the lonely road.

"It was just your pulling at him on top, I think," said Moira, with the thoughtless candour which is so hard to bear. "It wasn't big."

Milton grunted scornfully.

"But it was lovely. And those big fences are so easy," said Moira enthusiastically. "Oh, we hadn't

far to come. Here is Ballytubbert; the others aren't in, of course; but we'll have our tea now."

The bright morning was waning to a bitter night: a cold east wind drove across the wood, the sky was pallid with cold, grass was crisping under a sharp frost. The man took the horses, and they turned towards a small hotel standing by the station. Now, to give Ireland the honour due to it, the place was kept by no true son of the land; the owner was half English, half American, a trainer of race-horses, who cared nothing for his hotel. The door was opened by a maiden steeped in dirt, a red flannel jacket her only bodice; her skirt a study in gaps. In response to a demand for tea, she ushered them into a room to the left; on entering it, Moira started back in dismay. A reek of porter and whisky and vile, stale tobacco drove in her face as a blow. The floor was covered with a filthy linoleum, the one long table with the same; there was no fire, and a baby's perambulator, filled with dirty outdoor garments, stood near the fireplace.

Captain Milton said "Good God!" sharply, and thundered on the bell.

"Was there no other room? They could not take tea here."

The flannel-jacketed maiden considered the question, and led them down a grimy passage into a smaller room, if possible dirtier than the first, but evidently of a more private nature, and apparently, judging by dirty collars and other garments lying on the table, occasionally used as a dressing-room. The thought of taking tea anywhere in the house made Moira

sick; she proffered an urgent request to be allowed to go without food, and to sit at the railway-station until train time.

Captain Milton looked at his watch; they had an hour and a half to wait. He interviewed the porter, who told him they should have entrained at Ardgrath, three miles farther back.

"There's a nate little hotel there that all the hunting genthrey goes to," he told them. "Tay, and eggs, and jam and all ye'd fancy. Sorra a thing in there"—he nodded strong disapproval at the house they had left—"but the dhregs of porther and whisky. There's none sthops there but thim that can't help it, or wants to drink."

A car drove up to the station, and the porter was struck by a brilliant idea. "There's Andy O'Mally's cyar," he said, "come in with a parcel from Misther O'Grady's. He's goin' back to Ardgrath. If ye were arlier ye could dhrive back with him, an' have tay, an' catch the thrain beyond."

Milton again consulted his watch. If it was only three miles away they still had time, and the idea of tea was alluring—for it was very cold. They took their bags and drove away, leaving word to tell what they had done.

Andy O'Mally declined to be hurried. There were parcels to collect at the station, a box of books on the well, a bag of flour to be strapped on to the driving seat, from which it nodded like a headless alderman. The three miles were Irish, and therefore elastic, stretching interminably through a flat, bare land, where the banks flung black shadows in the moonlight. It was bitterly cold now, as the old

horse jogged monotonously, walking up every slope to spare his breath, and down each hill to spare his spavined hocks.

Andy O'Mally was taciturn and sparing of speech. When asked to hurry he beat the horse softly, but as one who had not the faintest idea of the blow hastening the speed. As they dipped between high hedges into a well of gloom and emerged into the pale, clear light of the moon, a row of trembling lights in front gladdened them. It was then that Milton looked again at his watch, and exclaimed feverishly. Tea was no longer a consideration, for the hands pointed to 6.5. "Drive to the station," commanded Milton. "God, what a horse! We can only catch the train now."

"If ye can do that same," said Andy, without emotion. "'Tis all up hill."

For the station at Ardgrath is not in the town. With horror they discovered that a mile of hilly road lay between, and even as they looked a long shrill whistle rent the still evening.

"Ye may as well have ye're tay, now," said Andy placidly. "If I was a mothor cyar I wouldn't be there."

"They—the others—will explain to Eva," said Moira, rather unhappily. "We can go on later."

"Faix, ye can, at two o'clock," observed Andy, as he took payment and drove away.

Moira had not realised the awkwardness of her plight. They had missed one train, they would go later, that was all. She yawned as they were shown nto a cosy sitting-room, where a bright fire warmed frozen hands and feet. Tea, hot toast, eggs and

cream were rapidly produced, and eaten with a hunter's appetite.

Milton stifled his conscience in the comfort of the small room. He took it as good fun, and seeing Moira did not mind, glazed it all over lightly.

"We can go by the night train," he said easily.

Moira shivered and yawned. She had a change with her. She would stay all night, and leave in the morning. Eva would not expect her until then, or meet her at half-past three at night. "That'll do, won't it?" said Moira, without thought.

Milton looked at her, and with a dense man's lack of perception, misread her carelessness. "I must go by the two," he said limply, not at all sure that he would do so, for the warmth of the room was lapping him to laziness.

They would want dinner. Jane, the little hand-maiden, was confident that they could have some. "There were chickens up on the roost," she said, "that could be cooked in time." On this being firmly declined, she called to an unseen Cornelius, and bade him knock up Casey to see if he had a bit of mutton "fit for the atin'." She said 'twouldn't agree with them "atin'" so late as eight, and then withdrew, clearing off the tea things.

The oil lamp, badly trimmed, flickered and smelt. The room grew over hot, and the one window was hermetically sealed. As Milton, puffing at a huge cigar, reeled forth tale after tale of his feats and prowess, Moira grew suddenly wakeful and uneasy. Eva would be alarmed, might be angry. The whole thing had been stupid and unnecessary, for she could have

done without her tea. The stillness of sharp frost held the world outside, broken by the occasional rumble of carts, or the clump of heavy footsteps on the crisp hardness of the roads. It was past seven now. The train was in, and Eva knew of her absence. She could not wire, for the little village held no office.

"Will you be wantin' Andy, sir, for the night thrain?" said Jane, thrusting in her head after a demure cough. "He says if you do he must sit below and not return home." Milton temporised for an hour. The prospect of turning out at two was not alluring. Moira, unheeding, was staring into the bright fire, her thoughts far away. She was thinking, with great conviction, that the Hermit would not have missed the train.

"Could one drive back? It's only about twenty-five miles by road?" she asked, looking up.

Milton laughed at the idea. Andy's old grey would most certainly never get there.

Moira stared into the fire again, abstracted, and yet strangely restless. Dragging her thoughts back with an effort, she looked across at Milton, listening vaguely to his tale of how he cut down a Leicestershire field. He was good-looking, well set up, and yet Moira knew there was no restfulness in sitting listening to his discourse. For companionship there must be sympathy, and Lancelot Milton was too self-centred to be sympathetic. The idea of listening to Moira while she talked about her old life or present experiences never entered into his head.

He grew merry as Jane appeared with plates, or

the news that Cornelius had got the chops, twitting Moira on her dulness.

"Rather fun, after all, isn't it?" he said superbly, lounging against the mantelpiece—"cosy and jolly in here as we are." The tender note in this was broken short by Jane, dish in hand, entreating him "for the love of God not to lane agin the chimney boord, for 'twas only held by one nail, that might give any minit at all." In her fear, she rushed at him, pulling him away with a jerk which shot a chop into the fireplace.

"See that now," said Jane, picking it out with the tongs. "There's not a ha'porth on it but a taste of ashes," she added, blowing lustily, and greatly surprised when Moira ordered its removal.

"'Twasn't hurt no more than if 'twas cookin'," said Jane, offended. "The other chops is waitin' on ye," she said, banging down the dish. They were noble chops, cut in thick slabs, straight across some unknown portion of a sheep. They had been fried to a dull brown, and came up supine and greasy, with a little fat-spotted water poured about them.

The knife glided off them with a jar of surprise, and when a piece, torn away, was tasted, they proved to be tough as leather, and tasting strongly of turf smoke and frying-pan. Moira took potatoes, and was content, but Captain Milton grumbled savagely. Jane bent humbly before his storm of abuse.

"I'm thinkin', afther all, that Casey lied," she said penitently. "Cornelius saw Matty Mahers' ould sheep being dhruv up there to-day, and, maybe, 'tis a bit of that same he cut off for him. Ye couldn't be up to the ways of thim butchers. There wouldn't be one

here at all, only there's two great houses to be supplied."

Milton drank fiery whisky. Moira had tea.

The little clock said half-past eight, and the hoot of a motor suddenly tore at the stillness outside. It was throbbing fast up the road; they heard it stop outside.

"Glory be to the hevins, a mothor!" cried Jane, flinging herself downstairs. They could hear her shrieking to Cornelius to turn out the old ass if the gentlemen wanted a house.

Milton lounged across to Moira, who was sipping tea dejectedly. "I hope they won't come in here, whoever they are," he said fatuously. He sat down upon the arm of her chair, and his face, which spoke of untamed whisky, was rather near hers.

Moira moved away quickly, a hot flush on her face. If Captain Milton was moved to this mood, she felt that Andy and the car out in the cold would be a pleasant alternative. She had all a young girl's fear of seeming too angry, or being stupidly offended, and she glanced at the door miserably. Steps were coming up the stairs.

Milton followed her across. The raw spirit worked in his brain, and Moira's flushing face was alluring. It was time for some slight return for weeks of devotion.

"What a nuisance, isn't it?" he said, and took her hand in his. "They must go soon, though; then we'll have a nice time, all alone."

"Oh, please," said Moira helplessly.

"I've come to take you home, Moira," said a quiet voice at the door.

"Why—who the deuce?" said Milton.

"The Hermit! You!" Moira shot to her feet with a cry; she dashed across the room, clinging to his hands, feeling as some disconsolate little pleasure boat, which, rudderless and beaten by waves, is suddenly towed into harbour by a steam tug.

"Oh, how, and where, and when?" she cried.

The Hermit looked hard at Milton, question, as well as anger, in his eyes. The longer he looked the less satisfied he appeared to be. Milton, growing visibly uneasy under the scrutiny, began to explain hazily, in a manner calculated to convey that no train could ever have been caught, at any hour.

"Slip into your coat, Moira," said the Hermit. "I came down to Ballydare this morning, and went to the station to meet you. It appears the horse you ordered hurt itself against a hearse. And, when I heard of this piece of stupidity"—his eye raked Milton fiercely—"I came along to fetch you. We can take you, too," he said politely to Milton.

Moira babbled explanations rapidly: how they had wanted tea, at least, Milton had, and how Andy's horse had been so slow, and there was no other train.

"You were, of course, driving home?" said the Hermit to Milton, who stood silent for once, with a whipped feeling which he had believed lost in his childhood.

"I was going by the midnight train," said Milton stiffly.

The Hermit's face cleared a little, to fall again as Jane put her nose in.

"Andy says he'll wait no longer, yer honour.

Will ye want him or not for the two thrain? But sure, ye're all off now." Captain Milton's answer was not audible.

The Hermit, still very quiet, paid the bill. They went downstairs to get into a 20-h.p. Daracq, which throbbed noisily at the door. Moira and the Hermit sat in front; Milton got in at the back with the man. They bade good-bye to Jane, and swooped at the silver streak of road, the keen air cold upon their faces. Moira's tongue burst into eager questioning. "Why, how, when had the Hermit come down? Why had he not written? What did it mean?

"He had motored down," he said; "he was going to buy a horse and hunt for a little." He looked down at Moira with questioning eyes. "It was a great piece of folly, wasn't it?" he said. "Unless——" and he looked back a little at Milton. "What if I had not come to fetch you, Moira?"

"I was going back at eight to-morrow," said Moira uneasily.

"The world has apparently not taught you wisdom. There are some things you may not do," he said sharply. "Eva was broken-hearted when the train came in." Again he looked at her with a curious question in his eyes, and he sighed a little impatiently.

The car devoured the empty road—fortunately almost a straight one—and once they reached Coolgranagh there were telegraph posts to guide them. A halo dimmed the peevish moon, telling the silver frost was a mere forerunner of rain; but the icebreath fell heavily now, crisping the world to silver.

It was joy when, having dropped Milton, they

swung through the narrow gates at The Beeches, into the radiance of yellow light cast by the unshuttered windows. There was welcome for the returned prodigal. Biddy had prepared an extravagant supper, and they passed from the cold of the frosty night into the warmth of the little square room.

But Eva, when the Hermit, having partaken largely of cold chicken and bacon, hot cakes and much butter, left them, was absent and even vexed. For the first time the elder sister asserted her seniority, daring to question the conduct of the stronger-willed younger girl.

"It was a pity, Moira; I don't like it. You see, the Hermit appeared suddenly just from nowhere, and we went off to the station, meaning to surprise you. The Hermit stayed outside in the car: I went to the train, and—" Eva's voice grew troubled—"Mrs. Vereker was there, and she would scarcely speak to me."

"And Dennis?" asked Moira eagerly.

"Dennis, good boy, was held by his mother's hand." There was faint contempt in Eva's voice. "But then Mr. Cromartin got out—'Your sister's missed the train,' he said. 'She got to Ballytubbert in time, but she went off with Captain Milton to take tea somewhere, at Ardgrath, I believe, and never got to the station.' Moira, I saw Mrs. Vereker turn and look. 'There's a train back at two,' Mr. Cromartin said, 'and one early to-morrow morning. Miss Considine took her bag, so she can stay if she wants to.' He said something under his breath about Captain Milton then, and he looked so put out. Moira, Mrs. Vereker

won't forget it. It's—it's time we went back to Borrisdeane . . . ."

Moira, with hot cheeks, said "Rubbish," miserably. "The Hermit is here now to hunt," she added; "we couldn't go." Eva shook a despondent head; she had not, it would appear, represented things very cheerfully to the Hermit.

CHAPTER XV

THE NIGHT OF THE PARTY

"IT'S all been a great success, then," said the Hermit, addressing himself to Moira.

"Of course," said Moira stiffly, and the tail of a warning eye dwelt fiercely upon Eva.

The Hermit had arrived to breakfast. He said he knew Biddy would give him some. His arrival had occasioned the immediate removal of Patsy from his horses, to be dispatched to Mary Guinane's and Tommy Sheeby's for an odd egg or so, also the hasty slapping together of a griddle-cake, which was outwardly crisp and inwardly soft and altogether excellent.

"You've had a really good time in this new world of yours?" he asked, dodging a well-aimed puff from the fire.

"Yes," said Moira, this time angrily.

"The Star's a skeleton and Gog's legs are bolsters," observed Kathleen with unnecessary candour, and apropos of nothing.

The Hermit's eye travelled slowly round the smoke-grimed dining-room. "It's not a very well furnished world," he said thoughtfully. "But there's lots going on," he said cheerily. "The Boots at the hotel filled me with information. It was dull for you at Borris-

deane. Well, are you going to the Kavanaghs', or to the dance—the Leigh Dares'—afternoon bridge of course there?"

"We—we are engaged this evening," said Moira, avoiding the keen blue eyes.

"And there's bridge here in the afternoon." Little Kathleen was irrepressible. "And Captain Milton is sure to come to see Moira."

"Oh!" said the Hermit, very quietly.

Kathleen, rejoicing in unbaked griddle cake, said a day without Captain Milton would be an event. She smiled knowingly at the Hermit, whose smile in response lacked gaiety. "And Miss Eva and her Vereker boy," said Kathleen.

"And you?" asked the Hermit.

"Oh! I've the horses," said Kathleen thoughtfully. "I hunt nearly every day. Mr. Moroney says I'm a terror," she added with sudden cheer. "I jumped on one of his hounds last day. I'll show you Jim Crow," she said invitingly.

They went out to the little yard. James Dunne was pleasantly engaged in stuping Gog's legs, while Patsy explained how he himself was whipped away to get eggs. "And they should be fresh," said Patsy, "for I had to wait on Mary Guinane's yallow hin while she laid the brown one."

The Star, a dejected object, was faintly tasting crushed oats and hot bran. Patsy thought she might hunt on the morrow.

"She'd break any man's heart," he said, watching an ever-ready heel. "The day afther huntin' she'd fly round her box like a wild sparry, and I declare to God she wouldn't pick as much."

"There's some comfort in Gog," he went on, "even if what he ate would go into his legs."

A big cheque seemed to be a very long way off now. Moira, ever hopeful, said they would get it in the summer, when The Star grew fat and Gog's legs grew thin. There would be the winter's hunting reputation to sell them on. Her sore little heart was resenting the Hermit's appearance and questionings.

Eva observed gloomily that horses cost sheer fortunes to feed. She seemed to buy something each day. Biddy, appearing with food for some stray chickens, which she had refused to kill because they were hens, cast aspersions on all horseflesh.

"There was more vally in the old cow an' the two pigs we had beyant," she said stoutly, "that'd ate grass what ye wouldn't miss, an' that male an' scraps'd kape fat an' sthrong."

The Hermit agreed with her with due gravity. Yet he observed a few minutes later that he intended to buy or hire a horse himself, so that he might hunt next day.

Kathleen immediately suggested Malone.

The Hermit shook his head. "Slattery," he said, 'for me. Malone if I wanted a good young one, but Slattery's will be trained and fit to go."

"Ould Slathery's dead," remarked James Dunne, who was staring hard at the Hermit, and appeared to have something on his mind. "Young Martin an' his mamma does the bizness now, and a 'cute young chap he is too."

"We'll motor there," said the Hermit, "and get back early. They went in to the fire; the morning

was raw and cold. "And so Ballydare actually has three parties to-day, and you say you are engaged elsewhere. Who to, Moira?"

"Mamma wants to know, have you a 'shape,' Miss Moira?" said Baby Julia, putting a coy head round the door.

"Dear me," said the Hermit faintly, bereft of words by the vision.

The Baby was somewhat flurried and uncurled. Perceiving the Hermit, she wound her fur about her neck to hide her lack of collar-band, and pranced in.

"I'm not got up," she announced truthfully, "for I'm in the kitchen all morning, an' I just lit up in the jennet's inside-outside car—that was after fetching soda-water—and cantered over here to you, mamma being demented. We're short of a round shape, if you have one or two to set the jellies in. We have all ours used, and there's none set to turn out yet. I hope you'll bring your friend to-night," she added sweetly, as Moira introduced them.

"It's only a little bit of a hop," she said modestly—"just boys and girls and a few officers. But, indeed, we'd be very glad to see you. It's hard to get an arm to give every girl a twirl. An' papa won't forget the champagne, whatever happens. There's life in a drop of champagne," said the Baby joyously.

"There is indeed," said the Hermit gravely. "I"—he looked at Moira—"I shall be charmed to come."

"Success," said Baby Julia, with some enthusiasm, "success to you."

Biddy appeared with two tin moulds, and Julia, taking them in her ample hands, sat down.

"Claara whipped the head off me this morning," she confided, "and set papa on me no less. She found me making a hiding hole for meself in papa's writing-room. I tell you I caught it."

She rose, clutching the shapes and her fur.

"I won't be such a figure when you see me again," she babbled. "Don't be late now. Eight o'clock we'll begin, an' go on till we're tired." And Julia, clasping her shapes, vanished.

"So—that's the engagement?" said the Hermit slowly. "That's the engagement, Moira? Papa Geoghan is rather a decent person as well as I recollect."

"Oh, yes," said Moira, with an airiness she did not feel.

"He used to sell me harness when I was here," said the Hermit—"in his own shop. Your world is assorted, Moira." He watched her flushing face. "Come, let's go to buy horses, and I'll wind up with the car."

Slattery's was some miles away. The Daracq slid through the chill grey day at a merry pace. Pallid clouds had overcast the air, last night's frost still lay silver in the hollows; but the wind had changed, and its faint sob spoke of swiftly coming rain. The Hermit seemed to know his way; they ran through the high hedges bordering the narrow by-roads, and on past Malone's house, where Moira had had her first encounter with Mrs. Vereker and her sheep.

She spoke of it now, pointing to the gap leading from the road.

"She seemed to dislike us from the first," said Moira disconsolately, "and to dislike me most of

all. I've seen her watching me with such a cruel look."

"It's curious." The Hermit spoke half to himself.

"And I—I seem to have seen her before," went on Moira. "I felt that from the first."

"You can't think where?" asked the Hermit, artistically shaving a wandering donkey.

"No-o," answered Moira slowly. "She seems mixed up in my mind with you, and that's absurd."

The Hermit said nothing.

They climbed to higher ground, and flashed past Tulla covert. A faint gleam of sun touched the patch of gorse as they passed. To Moira the place always recalled old Dunne's tale; she spoke of it now: of the life-story brought to a close there so many years ago; of the cruel, cold girl; and the man who, goaded to madness, had spoken his mind, and then tried to ride to his death. "Oh, I've pitied him so often, for he was so young," said Moira softly.

The Hermit slowed the car.

"A slash from the surgeon's knife may be better than a growing sore," he said, very quietly. "It hurts. Yes—it hurts." His teeth were set now. "But, supposing he had married the girl who had no more heart than the statues she surrounds herself with, what would his life have been? He was poor, this boy; the inheritance he hoped for then never came. Perhaps the pain he bore then was better than a lifelong one yoked to a woman whose soul would have cried out for the things he could not give. Men love shadows sometimes, little Moira—glorious shadows perhaps, beautiful to see, but cold and chill withal as the mist wraiths on a winter's night. Oh,

and men's hearts are sore when they find it all out, until some day perhaps the pain dies and they live again, and this time, not for the desire of their boyish eyes, for so much beauty, without one thought of the nature behind the mask which maddens them, but some one who creeps into their hearts, who is lovelier to them now than the being they once deemed perfect."

Moira stared hard at the hedges as they slipped by. The Hermit no doubt spoke of the girl he meant to marry. The air seemed to grow suddenly sharper, for her eyes smarted.

"Love is all humbug," she said gruffly.

"Do you think so?" The Hermit's voice grew suddenly chill. "You think so, Moira? I suppose" —he laughed suddenly—"no girl could love me, for instance."

Moira said politely—and she could not understand why, going slowly as they were, her eyes should still hurt—"that no doubt it was all a matter of taste." She conceived a sudden unreasoning dislike for the absent fiancée, and wondered why the Hermit would not speak of it openly. "Some dumpy, ugly thing," thought Moira with quick wrath.

"I suppose that's it"—the car leapt suddenly to fuller speed, licking up the strip of road. "I suppose so, Moira. Well, I half expected it all." The Hermit's face was strangely sad as he looked ahead; his eyes quietly wistful. "He—would appeal to some tastes."

Moira asked, "Who?" sharply.

"Your friend Milton," said the Hermit. "He is of course good-looking—in a way."

"He's exceedingly handsome," said Moira crossly. "But I don't know what he's got to do with your——" She bit off marriage, and left the sentence unfinished.

The Hermit thought Captain Milton had a great deal to do with everything, but he said nothing more.

Slattery's house, a square little building, lay in a hollow below them. Ranges of stables, painted black, straggled all round it. A huge hay-barn full of hay and another of straw overhung the front windows. All around was a perfect schooling ground—small fields, fenced by every variety of fence; banks, ditches, water, even timber. Young Martin was at home, and came smiling to meet them. It astonished Moira to see an old helper prick up his head and greet the Hermit as "Misther Grattan" with a cry of surprise.

"I had another name down here, you see," said the Hermit, explaining. "Tremayne is really only a Christian name which I passed under at Borrisdeane. "How are you, Tom?" he said to the old man.

"A few more broken bones since you saw me, sir. It's twenty-two years since you bought a horse from us; and the ould man, God rest his sowl, was hale an' well then. An' yet I'm here an' he's gone."

Stables were opened, horses pulled out. Some were rejected instantly, others seen at a gallop and across fences. The Hermit's choice from the first fell on a blood-like brown, fired for curbs, but with a hunter-like look about him. There was a bay he rode also—a big, raking brute with an awkward

mouth, but a fine mover, and a bold, if not a clever, jumper.

Moira had often seen him ride at Borrisdeane, but it was a revelation to watch him manage the bay five-year-old—steadying it as it rushed, head up, at the fences; easing it round turns; sitting down on the flat to see how it could move.

"How much for the two?" he asked, slipping down.

Martin Slattery put on his most guileless expression and said as it was two, and not one, he would take two hundred and ninety.

The Hermit walked quickly round the horses. He looked at the brown's hocks, and lighted on a last year's blemish on the bay.

"I want them. I'll give you a hundred and eighty," he said. "And that's more than they're worth."

Young Martin leant against a haystack in pained horror. "When he put them at their lowest, too. It was useless to talk of a hundred each for such horses."

The Hermit explained easily that he wasn't doing so. He was talking of one hundred pounds for the bay, bad puller as he was, and eighty pounds for the fired brown.

Slattery dismissed the horses more in sorrow than in anger. As a favour he might take off ten pounds for luck: might even stretch it to fifteen; but otherwise—"Feed thim horses," he said sorrowfully, "an' clane thim, Joe."

But Joe had disappeared. His absence was followed by the hurried appearance of Mrs. Slattery,

a comely woman of fifty, to insist on their taking refreshment.

"Don't I recall ye well, Misther Grattan?" she said, wringing his hands. "Many's the horse Slattery sold ye, an' I wish he could come in to see ye himself. He'd not let ye go hungry, so will ye take a bit?"

The Hermit cast one gruesome thought on what the present appearance of Slattery would be like, and accepted politely.

"He wasn't as hard a man as his son," said the Hermit, watching the pained back view of Martin as he gave some directions to a helper.

Mrs. Slattery said young men were apt to be too clever, and wished to know if it would be whisky or a cup of "tay."

The Hermit chose tea hastily, though from old experience he knew it would resolve itself into a square meal of boiled eggs and fried bacon and hot bread and jam, and many other things unsuited to a mid-day meal.

Moira, her existence blotted out of the flood of reminiscence flowing from Mrs. Slattery's lips, sat down modestly. The Hermit inquired for Katie, asking if she was now married.

Mrs. Slattery shook a troubled head. Her heart, it would appear, was broke from making matches for Katie, whom a convent education had rendered too fine for ordinary men.

"But I think I have her off with Joe Magee's nephew," said Mrs. Slattery, after a lusty call to her absent daughter to come to Mr. Grattan.

A hurried pattering overhead was accelerated to a

swift scampering, and then Katie, very fine and very breathless, appeared. She was rubbing her hands as she came.

"Don't mind the wet on me hands, Misther Grattan," she said as she held them out. "'Tis only the way I'm afther washin' them."

The Hermit wrung the moist hands warmly, and tea proceeded. Moira, who was still neglected, ate eggs and bacon thoughtfully. This was the Hermit in quite a new light. In absence of mind she even helped herself to plum jam on to her bacon, and found they did not agree.

The Hermit rose at last. It was after two, and Moira wanted to be back. He said no more about the horses until he was leaving.

"Sorry we couldn't deal," he said as he left. "I'll just look in at old Heinihan, to see if he has a screw for me for to-morrow. Good-bye."

Heinihan, another old friend, was not at home. There seemed nothing for it but the black or grey hireling from Malone.

They went slowly back by the lane, past Slattery's house, and on by the narrow, twisting roads to Ballydare. As they drove round the corner above Tulla covert, they were astonished to see young Martin Slattery, riding a blood horse, galloping across the field towards them. Both he and his steed were hot and breathless; also, his coat was not innocent of mud stains.

"I galloped straight across," he explained, "to cut ye off, Misther Grattan. I'll take yer offer. I wint in directly you were gone, and I tould me mamma all—the price, and what was betune us. 'Martin,'

says she, 'don't be a ——' (Martin bit off a red word with difficulty), 'don't be a—a—damn fool,' says she, 'but take the money the gintleman offered ye.' Them's the very words, now, me mamma used to me."

The Hermit examined the steering gear minutely; when he raised his head he had ceased smiling. He gave directions concerning the taking of his steeds to the meet; made no comment as to the altered price, and drove on.

"I hope I shan't have you late, Moira," he said as they raced on.

"For what?" said Moira.

"For bridge and Captain Milton," said the Hermit thoughtfully.

The little drawing-room was full as they got in. An absence of noise never marked the Considines' afternoons. Captain Milton was romping with Kathleen, who accepted it absently and without enthusiasm; though her retaliation of a glass vase full of water was not ill-aimed. Cromartin was putting out the bridge things. Biddy had, as directed, left decanters and syphons on a table in the corner.

Another motor turned in after theirs, and Moira saw with pleasure it was Dennis Vereker. She whispered the news to the Hermit. He grew suddenly white and quiet.

"So that is young Vereker. He must be twenty now," he said. "No; don't introduce me, Moira."

Dennis lifted a parcel. "A book," he said. "No; I really can't come in, Miss Moira. It's a book your sister lent to me."

Moira demanded with asperity his reason for not taking tea with them.

"I—I can't, really"; and Dennis stumbled and blushed over the simple words.

"Eva's in," said Moira.

Dennis looked through the window. Eva, her hair shining and her pretty face rather grave, was throwing down, almost angrily, a flower which Milton had pelted her with. A sudden onslaught from Kathleen involved her in a moment's romping, from which she had emerged ruffled and clearly annoyed. Dennis's lips set suddenly. His mother was stronger than he was. He looked again—for Eva, who knew he was there, never looked out—and then he bent over the car.

"Good-bye," he blurted out. "My mother's waiting." Yet, as his car sped over the wide road to the town, weak Dennis Vereker knew that his eyes were full of tears; knew that he had forged his slave chains afresh in treble steel; had bound his boyish hands with ropes which would never part.

"His father's son," said the Hermit. "Poor boy! his life is as much moulded as though it had been passed into one of Baby Geoghan's 'shapes.' Well; you don't lack gaiety, Moira, in your world."

He sat apart and quiet, saying he would watch the bridge—a quiet which was almost pungent when they played their hands.

Borrisdeane had not reached the stage of acute bridge; but the Hermit had been a whist player, and Moira's reckless disregard for any ordinary rules made his eyebrows wander to his hair.

He came and sat close to her once, watching her

fumble over a return and distinctly throw away the game. It was rather a troubled little face as he looked down on it, with new, faint lines about the mouth—lines which had no business to be there.

"My dear girl"—Milton was a man who permitted himself these familiarities—"My dear girl, if you had bottled your ace, and had returned a spade, we must have won four tricks. You *are* a little duffer."

Moira shook her head dolefully, and the Hermit looked as if an acute desire to hit something had come across him.

"A most expensive partner." Milton added up the score somewhat sourly. "That's seven and six to chalk up."

Eva, who was looking on, sighed a little. This paying of bridge debts was not the smallest of her troubles. Even at half a crown a hundred persistent losses mount up. Moira had just reached the stage when her thoughts leaped far beyond her skill, when she essayed coups, and then, unable to count cards, almost forgot what she had tried for. Eventually she might play well; but at present she was bound to lose.

Biddy came in with tea, and her inevitable plate of hot griddle-bread; but Milton, yawning openly, declined tea. He filled a long glass with a stiff peg, and was about to drink it when the Hermit laid a gentle hand upon his shoulder. He had another tumbler in his hand.

"You and I," he said, "can go into the dining-room."

Before Milton could remonstrate he was spirited away; and as the dining-room was puffing smoke from a dim fire, he returned in a peevish humour. The lack of ceremony at The Beeches had been one of its great charms.

After tea they played more bridge, and, tired of that, fell to the romping which so often passes for merriment; and through it all the Hermit sat quiet and aloof.

The Geoghans' party necessitated a somewhat early departure for the men.

"I wouldn't miss it for fivers." Milton looked at his watch and got up, and took Moira aside. "How many waltzes, Miss Moira, eh?"

Moira replied vaguely; she had not enjoyed the afternoon.

"Well, the first, at all events." If Milton meant his voice to be low, he failed, for it travelled clearly to the ears of the others. "Then, we can sit out a bit and watch the fun. Don't fill up until you see me."

Moira nodded absently, and came back to the fire. She was very much afraid that she would not be able to dance at all, some slight practice with a chair having been her only attempt to learn the art.

"The world is rather a noisy place," said the Hermit, as he watched the three men go.

"You were always down upon it," said Moira resentfully.

"Perhaps I thought it was a wide place for three girls to stray into alone"—his eyes fell rather severely upon the small table and the whisky decanters. "Ballydare, in my day, was stiff and old-fashioned.

I am glad the hunting people are all so nice to you, and realise that you are only young."

There was something in his voice which banished the angry words which Moira meant to flash back. The Hermit did not look as if leaving Borrisdeane had made him happier.

"And now that you've tasted the sweets of all this rollicking, I suppose you'll like to keep to the life, Moira: moving about, seeing fresh faces, meeting new people, always in towns? Young blood would never care for the stagnation of the old sea coast. The waves and the lake, and the fishing in summer, would not weigh for a fraction's space against this —fun?"

There was question, more than certainty, in his words.

Moira stared hard at the glowing fire. She seemed to hear the plash and shiver of the lake through reeds and on stony beach, hear the distant boom of the sea, feel the west wind on her face, the ecstasy of a suddenly tightened line, the triumph of the moment when a tired fish was slipped into the net; more, to feel again the peace of that old, dull life, where there were no disappointments, and no ring of cold, disapproving faces.

The tug at her heart hurt her; her eyes might smart, but she answered flippantly. It was no time to let the Hermit see the failure of the enterprise.

"Oh yes, I'd love to move about; to meet heaps of people. Life at Borrisdeane was mere stagnation—where one saw no one, knew no one." She glanced across at Eva, who was lost in unhappy thought.

"Here it is different," said Moira. She would like to have this kind of fun always.

"I . . . see," said the Hermit, and his voice dropped from question to quiet sadness: and his fists clenched once or twice, as if an active animosity was mixed with his musings.

At a little before eight two Miss Considines, radiant in flimsy ball gowns, were ready to start. Eva was nervous, because the scanty sleeves which she had insisted on copying seemed to leave her bare and unprotected now. Moira was a blaze of assertive blue, with some beads, which the Hermit wanted to burn, wound about her soft throat. Nothing would induce Kathleen to go. She was studying a bulky volume, which she said Moroney had sent her by post, so that she might realise what a hound was worth next time she jumped on one.

"And I thought I'd better know before to-morrow, for Malone is lending me a young one that pulls," said Kathleen, settling to her book.

The Hermit put the hood up and drove them across. Needless to say, they were too early. Baby Julia, whose amplitude of hair-pads neutralised her lack of bodice, burst upon them five minutes after they arrived, and said the breath was out of her from pulling at Claara's body. "An' we had to lay a bit of stuff under the lacing at the last," confided the Baby. "My! I knew we were late. There's mamma in the kitchen yet, with her puce dress above on the bed in her room."

Cornelius, whose shirt front suffered from lack of stamina, and whose white gloves would go on no

farther than his thumbs, now bounced into the room to hang over Eva, and pray for dances.

"You could lay your heel on the floor and 'twould slip to your head," he told her. "Baby has it that thick with French chalk. An' the fiddler is tuning up already, inside."

People began to straggle in. It was Moira's first dance, and she watched breathlessly. The fine young women of the afternoon emerged from much cloaking in a vanity of strange garments, Baby Julia's white silk, shining moonlike amid a cloud of lesser stars. There were too apparent evidences of neck-bands cut off for the occasion, skirts not intended for dancing, among the visitors.

"I just slashed a bit off the top, and bowed up a few yards of ribbon, and wouldn't it do for court?" confided one young woman happily, as she embraced the Baby, and said, "Hello, Corny, ain't you grand in your new black coat?" to the heir of the house.

Moira, the Hermit by her side, moved into the dancing-room. He was very tall and remote among the slouching youth about him; very grave, as he asked Baby Julia to dance, and declined other introductions courteously.

"They'll tear me for spite," said the Baby, "they will, indeed. Katie Malone has her eye on me, asking you. . . . If you could give her one twist?"

But the Hermit, now exceedingly grave, because torn by desire for laughter, could not.

"She's eating the face off Tommy Quin," said the Baby sorrowfully, "because he wants to pull her out. It's no go, Katie," she shrilled loudly; "you may as well take Tommy."

"It—it"—the Hermit was a little breathless as he spoke—"it's wonderful, Moira. Supposing we dance. Not this one—you're engaged—but later." He wrote his name on her programme, bowed and moved to Eva, who was striving to escape from Cornelius.

Cornelius left with reluctance, and moodily offered his support to Moira. "Will we take a turn?" he said. "The walls can stand without you."

Moira's first essay of dancing represented a bumping chaos, a firm clasping of Cornelius, as he swung her from the ground, and the absolute certainty of striking into every other pair as they met them.

Cornelius swooped at the floor as he would have at a gap out hunting. If he heard the music, it was not apparent in his steps, and when he landed poor, panting Moira up against a sofa, he wiped his brow and said, "'Twas grand."

"There's nothing like a bit of steam," said Cornelius. "I'm thinking 'twas we knocked Mary Raffarty, that's getting up." He pointed to a maiden in pink, who was rising from her knees.

Moira, faintly, thought it was.

"I wouldn't like to be the one to marry that one," ruminated Cornelius. "She threw an eye on me now like the blow of a hatchet."

When the dance was ended, Cornelius abandoned his partner. As she would not take lemonade or tea, he seemed to have no further use for her.

Milton was late, and Moira again found herself alone. The fine young women were all enjoying themselves hugely. Where they had not a partner apiece, they were not too proud to club round anything in dress clothes, and take small shares in its

protecting presence. Their giggles rose shrilly. Miss Clara and the Baby were, on the other hand, somewhat absent, for the expected party from the barracks were fashionably late.

"I have not been to a dance," said the Hermit, "for over twenty years." He appeared suddenly by Moira's side, and the fickle groups turned awe-struck to stare at his tall, grave presence, and, to them, eccentrically cut dress clothes.

"Denny Conellan below in Mill Street'd give you a better fit than that," said Katey Malone's brother scornfully.

The Hermit said it was all so interesting. The lady musician, advancing from the piano, tweaked out a card containing the number, and installed 2 to replace it. The Hermit looked down at Moira. "If I've not forgotten how," he said, "let's dance."

They slipped into the crowd. The other couples, flopping or bounding, ceased to be nightmare-like menaces. Bare arms and black sleeves were glided by untouched. Squeaks of "Easy now, Mr. Slattery," "Oh, have a care, Cornelius, you're squeezing me," floated and were lost. The music was a stirring rhythm, bending awkward, unaccustomed feet to its command.

Moira forgot the painful steps she had learnt with the chair, she let herself swing as the Hermit danced, and her soul thrilled to it. In and out, he never lost an opening, never seemed to hesitate, but danced until Moira seemed to float in a misty, music-thrilled haze, with wraiths, half seen, passing and passed.

"Giddy, eh?" The Hermit's voice sounded a

long way off. "You would dance perfectly, Moira, if you practised."

Moira rested, breathless, watching the other couples as they flopped, and swooped, and lobbed, in a variety of strange attitudes, past her. The music died with a last crashing chord.

"Your friend is late, very late," said the Hermit.

Moira's heart was distinctly sore. She considered that the devotion which every one chaffed her about ought to have curtailed Milton's dinner, and brought him in time for the dance. Unless she accepted the invitations of the so-far-unknown youths, her card appeared likely to remain empty, for the Hermit had not asked her to dance again. Eva was wrestling with the attentions of Cornelius, and wearing a worried expression as she did so.

At that point the doorway was filled by four black-coated figures, and the Baby, dropping an unoffending partner as though his presence stung her, fled to meet them.

"And then you might have left the bit of pudding and come along," she said reproachfully.

"I wouldn't put it the same way, but I think it," said the Hermit.

Milton did not hurry, but seeing Moira, he came across.

"Savage hour to begin," he said. "You've kept my dances all right, I hope. Supper too . . . ."

The Hermit caught the glint in Moira's eye. "Miss Considine is taking supper with me," he said, and Moira smiled. The Hermit might be trying, but he always seemed to do the things she wanted him to.

Milton's evening was not at first quite what he had

hoped for. Moira was angry, and no longer quite complacent. She accepted other partners freely, and showed a complete lack of enthusiasm when he suggested sitting out for two or three dances, behind some of the carefully arranged screens. Thoughts came upon her, spurred to life by the lilt of the dance music, and for a space she was absent and absorbed.

But the night was young. The Hermit, who did not dance again with her, stopped her as she was leaving the room.

"About supper," he said; "that, of course, was only to help you out, Moira. Probably you'd prefer not to change those dances."

Moira's head went up: a sudden bitterness came cold about her heart. With the quickness of retort which so often led her into trouble, she told the Hermit she had no idea of troubling him; crossed his name viciously from her programme, and thenceforth flirted with Milton to the depth of his desire.

The Hermit looked at her, and led Miss Clara into the fray, abandoning his reserve.

"I have never," he said to Eva, "enjoyed anything so much in my life. I danced with a Miss Reidy, who said 'twas lovely, six times, and then told me I might as well call her Katie, as she had a sister older than herself." The Hermit grinned with a fervour which was new to him.

"And you did it?" said Eva.

"I did. I also squeezed her fondly, and she said 'Behave!'" The Hermit burst into unchecked laughter. "If you and Moira weren't here, I would not have missed it for gold. At present I am

awaiting the inevitable bursting apart of Miss Claara's body."

"Hurry down to supper," said Baby Julia to them, "before the breasts are off the turkeys."

The Geoghans would let no man starve. There were rows of turkeys and chickens, and even geese; mighty hams and several pigs' heads, flanked by hot potatoes and the home-made jellies, which were back-boneless in appearance. Champagne flowed freely. The punch-bowl smoked and flung out a head-swaying steam.

Papa himself carved frantically, heaping plates with food.

"There's no bits of things in 'aspect' jelly here," he said, as he laid half a turkey before Eva—"just to chill your stomach an' tantalise it. That bird was fed on barley meal for three months."

The Hermit made faint protest before a fresh mountainous helping. Moira, who had no appetite, was pecking at several pounds of ham carved for her by Cornelius.

"And the champagne's good," said the Hermit. "I wonder if the old fellow remembers me."

Supper was at eleven, and they might have stayed late had not Eva broken up their evening. She had left the room with Cornelius, who was not sober, and was sitting out, when the sound of a ringing slap was followed by the frantic appearance of the Geoghans' heir holding his hand to his cheek, and the subsequent appeal of Eva—following hastily—to the Hermit, to get her out of this awful place, as Cornelius had tried to kiss her.

It was not quite as easy as it looked. Cornelius,

distraught by grief and rage, first drank half a bottle of champagne, and then, for some occult reason known only to himself, perhaps to show his complete indifference, sped into the coolness of the night, and proceeded to wind up and attempt to drive the Hermit's motor. The Hermit arrived to find his car buzzing impotently against a locked gate, with the steering gear irretrievably damaged, and Cornelius declaring he knew all about motors, abusing this particular one for its want of power in hill climbing.

"On the top speed, she can't do it," cried Cornelius furiously.

The Hermit with firm despair removed the youth, seating him upon a stone to sober, while he bribed a waiting coachman to drive them home; Cornelius, who was now forgetting the car, rising at intervals to hold his sleeve, and assure him that he, Cornelius, would never love again.

The Hermit advised him not to, and with many protests took his leave, with a plea of Eva's indisposition.

Baby Julia was not to be hoodwinked. "'Tisn't a headache at all, but Corny's goings on," she said scornfully. "Indeed, you needn't mind, Miss Eva, for he'd kiss the cook after his supper; and he's daft about you."

Eva accepted this compliment without comment.

"And you're disturbing your sister," said the Baby. "She's stuck in a corner these three dances."

The light of amusement died out of the Hermit's eyes. He went down the passage and called Moira coldly.

She was sitting in a corner, but she came with

alacrity, Milton's manner suggesting that if he had not followed Cornelius's example, he had again not neglected papa's punch.

Moreover, as they settled themselves into the borrowed brougham, Moira remarked tartly that she thought dances, if people wouldn't dance, were exceedingly foolish, and rubbed her arm as if something had offended it.

They drove past the gloomy figure of Cornelius, still resting in the cold, and Eva, with a sudden laugh, told her tale.

"Cornelius was—upset," she said, "and he would sit out. And he said my hair was like the hair on his chestnut horse, 'twas that shiny, or maybe 'twas more like a new doll's, and my eyes were blue as his mother's old china set. And if I'd say the word he'd go to papa and get a dispensation if he had to go on his own two knees to Rome for it, and when I didn't say the word but tried to go he . . . and I think his face will be sore to-morrow," added Eva after a pause, "for I had my fan in my hand. The—the—wretched creature," she cried, passing from merriment to sudden wrath.

"You must never," said the Hermit, "go near those people again. Miss Kate Reidy, no doubt, would not have objected. I think at Borrisdeane you would not have cared to know the Geoghans.

Moira was amazed to find a sudden unbidden tear trickling down her nose. She wiped it off, and immediately snapped at the Hermit, because she did not know why it had come there.

Moira went to bed. The Hermit, before he walked home, stood talking to Eva.

"I suppose it's been for the best," he said. "Many things may happen down here. You——" he checked himself, remembering Moira's caution about Dennis Vereker, "and Moira——. That is—she cares for that fellow Milton—I suppose. He's always here. It—it will be settled, Eva?"

Eva shook her head thoughtfully. "Moira has said nothing to me. I know nothing," she answered—"nothing, except that it has all been a hideous failure." And Eva's face was very sad.

CHAPTER XVI

THE MEETING OF OLD FRIENDS

AS the Daracq, much indisposed, still leant against the locked gate at the Geoghans', the Hermit accepted the doubtful pleasure of a drive with the roan horse to the meet. Fate elected that it should be at Knock Castle, and with bitter certainty Moira knew that their position in the county's favour would be too speedily made known. Others would be pressed to go in, they would be left severely alone, and the Hermit's quiet eyes would read the truth. The effect of these ruminations brought Moira to breakfast with an expression of unchecked gloom, and her lack of appetite caused Biddy to cast aspersions on all ball-goings and their likes.

"Runnin' out without a screed on yer necks," said Biddy severely. "The like of that'd upset anyone's sthomach." She removed the boiled egg which Moira should have eaten, and said "the cyar was waitin' on thim, with Misther Tremayne above on it, an' he lookin' mosht unaisy."

The Hermit was "unaisy." The roan horse, sent to fetch him, had enlivened the short journey from the town by backing into two coal carts and upsetting a perambulator. As he now circled, despising a hand

on his bridle, across the flower-beds, it was evident that to-day a moving and not a stopping spirit possessed him.

The Star, leaning piteously against Gog, was just then led out of the gate, a grey and woebegone dream, every rib showing under her dry coat, and the roan's temper was not improved by the waiting before it was time to start.

Biddy advised more breakfast. She proffered the egg "Miss Moira wouldn't ate, be raison of the chill she got as she sthept lasht night," and on that being declined, insisted on the Hermit's drinking cups of hot tea.

It was not a cheerful breakfast party. Moira sat wound in a web of depression. Eva spluttered out little spurts of varied indignation, always directed against Cornelius, and the Hermit himself was very thoughtful.

"It is half a lifetime, twenty-two years," he said once, and looking out at the stretch of country. "I wonder if people will remember me—I was twenty-one then. Forty-three now, and I don't believe I've altered much."

His years sat lightly on him. His fair, soft hair had not receded from his forehead, or basely deserted the crown of his head. His grave face was but little lined, and his eyes, when they were not sad, were strangely youthful.

"Lying in a backwater does not age one," he said again, and had his musings rudely broken in upon by the determined attempt of the roan horse to come in at the window, and the subsequent remark of James Dunne's friend that there wouldn't

be a bit of the "cyar" together if they didn't go soon.

They drove off into a softly clouded day; grey drifts of vapour sailing across a pallid, misty blue; faint gleams of sunlight turning the distant hills to silver in patches. All the world seemed to be going to this meet, and the roan horse resented the crowd. Yet he behaved with discretion until they turned into the narrow road leading up to Knock, and a pony trap, with a rattling, jingling bell, came up behind. From that moment the hands of James Dunne's friend were fully occupied; the car pitched and rolled to the furious plunges, and ever, as the horse grew quiet, the bell arrived again to set him wild. The third occasion—when the roan grated the car against a wall, and took them over a heap of stones with a perilous tilt—broke the silence of James Dunne's friend. Turning round, he looked at the lady driving the pony with a long and baleful glance: "I wish that God Almighty could see her dead this night, an' yer bell along with her," he said heavily, but without emotion, and then succeeded in getting past the next trap and beyond the sound of the jingle.

The Hermit remarked that he thought he would have included the roan horse in the wish, and they arrived at the meet. It had seemed to Moira as they drove out that a breath, colder even than usual, was to be blown upon them. The roan gave scant time for greeting, but one or two women she knew had turned their heads away as though they did not wish to see her. As they pulled up on the lawn, horses and motors and traps streamed past them up towards the gleaming statues, by the sweep before the door.

The Hermit looked about him quietly, as if waiting to see them greeted by their friends—waited, with a look which made Moira's cheeks burn miserably.

"Who is that?" he said. A pretty woman was getting on to her horse.

"Lady Anne Knox. She is very nice." Lady Anne had often talked to Moira, and the girl nodded now, smiling.

But the cold breath was unmistakable. Lady Anne looked, and deliberately turned away. The roses on Moira's cheeks faded sharply: she said nothing. There was clearly something wrong. As the Hermit slipped from his coat, Moira was moved to an "Oh!" of unstinted admiration, and then sat staring at him with thoughtful eyes.

Other people passed: Mrs. Bellew, Mr. McArtney, and they, too, looked away with clear intent.

"Grattan!" It was a positive cry of welcome. Old General Knox came trotting across the grass. "Noll Grattan. After all these years. One would know you anywhere."

"And you. You've grown younger," said the Hermit.

He was only the first. In a few minutes Moira saw the Hermit, the man she had so loftily looked down upon, surrounded and welcomed by these people who had been so cold to her. They engulfed him, carried him away, and she drifted near on The Star, listening to the greetings, and watching the house through one of the openings in the trees.

Dennis Vereker, coming down the steps, saw her; she could see him stop, and stare, and hesitate. A dark figure came out behind him—his mother's—and

Moira then saw her nod in their direction—saw Mrs. Vereker take Mrs. Knox by the arm and whisper in her ear. There was something fresh, then ; the bitter tongue was not sparing them—passive avoidance was not enough, they were to feel the whip of active resentment.

A sob rose in her throat. She rode along the white iron railings nearer the Hermit.

"Moroney, come here." Old Knox was calling to every one. "You were a kid in those days. Here's Noll Grattan who jumped the boundary fence out of the wood here—and left us all." The Master rode up, giving warm greeting. "Here, Condon, don't you remember young Grattan ?"

The Hermit's grave face grew soft at his welcome. He rode among them laughing, exchanging memories of bygone sport. He had been with them for two years, and known and loved the place ; now the fear of return, which had been heavy upon him, was passing swiftly away.

Dennis Vereker came across the lawn between the house and the railings. "Violet's boy." Old Knox looked suddenly uneasy.

"I've seen him," said the Hermit quietly.

Dennis laid a hospitable hand upon the Hermit's bridle.

"Come along," he said, "and have something : cherry brandy—coffee. I'll look for my mother." He led the horse to the door.

But Mrs. Vereker came out again herself—tall, erect, and handsome, coming slowly down the marble steps, between the four guarding, gleaming statues ; cold as they were ; beautiful despite her years, her

pale, perfectly featured face unlined, her dark eyes clear and hard, her black hair untouched by silver.

"Dennis"—she spoke sharply—"you'll not forget what I told you about—— Dear heaven! Oliver!"

She was alive now, whiter than the figure she reeled against, but the mask off her face, and fear and pain and lashing memory driving in waves across it.

"You remember me, then, Violet?" The Hermit held out his hand and took hers.

The fear and pain merged to a sudden flash of triumph, or was it something more?—some gleam of a hope, hard held, which the long years had failed to kill?

The people about seemed to melt away. Heads were nodded, whispers hissed from lip to lip. So that was it. Oliver Grattan had come back to his faithless love, now a rich and handsome widow. The long years would be as naught. He would forgive the past and come to reign at Knock Castle.

Moira, standing by the railings, saw the two meet, and looking at them—knew. This was the boy old Dunne had told her of. It was Oliver Tremayne, the quiet old Hermit, who had flashed out those words of fiery scorn, and then tried to ride to his death. She knew now why some strange instinct had made her think so much of the story, knew with a strange throb of pain why she had so disliked Mrs. Vereker. The missing note in her memory rang out with clarion clearness as she remembered how she had seen the photograph in the Hermit's book; how she had bent in rapturous admiration over the lovely face, and then watched him burn it.

"A picture of a dead friend," he had said. Yet

now she saw him walk to greet the dead, and stand isolated while the hunt got to horse.

He could forgive; he could forget; could come all this way to marry the dead old man's widow; live on the dead old man's riches. It was unlike the Hermit, yet, with that dull pain throbbing at her heart, she supposed love planed all roughnesses smooth. This was what he had spoken of when he wrote; this was the change he meant to make.

Baby Julia, habited in a bright brown, with a blue tie straying under one ear and a false fringe straying over another, rode to her side. The Baby's aspect was hostile; they knew the long-longed-for officers themselves now, and no longer wanted the Considines. Also, they were annoyed by the treatment of Cornelius, who had been found asleep by Mary Maguire's carriage, and, having contracted a really violent cold, was now in bed.

"Nice stories we hear about you," said Baby Julia spitefully. "Mrs. Vereker has it all over the place, an' I heard it coming out—how you slipped off with the captain and stayed out all night. Oh, fie! fie for shame!" said Julia, with acid-tipped playfulness.

"I came home with Mr. Grattan," said Moira coldly, yet realising with quick remorse how foolish she had been. She knew now why heads were turned away. They had gone too far.

"Isn't it nice of him to say so now?" said Julia, openly incredulous. "Wasn't it bad luck Mrs. Vereker being at the station to hear, and you having your little spree settled so nicely? Not that I mind a farthing," said Baby Julia; "but mamma does."

Clear warning, even from the Geoghans, that

friendship was to cease. Had she been mad to go to this girl's house, to treat her and her people as friends, and now to suffer in consequence playful and venom-tipped impertinence?

"I really don't understand you," flashed out Moira, and turned away, while Baby Julia, who was not bad-hearted, sucked her whip-handle and wondered if she had said too much. It was Miss Clara who had urged her on.

Moira rode across to Eva just in time to see Dennis Vereker pass her sister with a stiff, shame-faced greeting.

Eva flung her head up and looked with a queer smile at Moira. "Mr. Vereker," she said clearly.

"I—can't stop. Got to speak to Moroney." He rode on, his red face paling, his hands unsteady on the reins, and his boy's heart knew its own bitterness.

"You see, Moira—I wanted you to see—that I shall never reign here among the statues." Eva smiled again. "Poor foolish boy. I have seen your plan all along, Moira, but it only amused me—for——." She paused. "My plans are always otherwise."

"Eva!" said Moira, unhappily looking at the gloomy, imposing frontage of the house.

"There are better things than money and big, cold houses," said Eva. "I've watched, smiling through it all; and now, Moira, people are cutting us."

Moira knew, and knew why. Her folly and her fault. She had led the others all through; she had taken the noisy merriment for smartness; she had scoffed at the elder sister's gentle remonstrances. And now.... It had been fortune or failure, and they had been doomed from the commencement.

Bitterest of all, the Hermit was here to see the fulness of the failure. She sought for one redeeming hope, and could find none. Money had melted ; the horses were valueless ; in a few weeks they must return to Borrisdeane, to live there for evermore : poor ; with no thought of ever leaving it, with no hope to write in golden letters across life's page : lonely ; no Hermit to fetch her to fish and to walk and to wrangle. The Hermit would be here in Ballydare ; master in the big, silent house, moving through the dim corridors, past lines of gleaming marble figures, with handsome Violet Vereker, her faithlessness forgiven, by his side.

The jog and pounding of the horses' feet, the laughing voices all round, seemed a dull boom of pain, a menace of sorrow, as Moira realised how cruel life can be to those who fail. Soft hands stretch sweetly to help success to a still higher pinnacle ; hard-booted feet kick failure from rock to rock, turning callously aside as he bumps to the lake at the bottom of life's mountain. Moira looked back ; the crowd had left Mrs. Vereker and her old lover alone. She could see them standing together, as the groom led up a big thoroughbred with a lady's saddle on it.

" Will you put me up ? " As some one in a dream, Mrs. Vereker moved towards the horse. Did she remember then that he had put her up twenty-two years before, on the day she had told him of her falseness ? It had seemed easier to let him know out hunting, where he would not make a fuss.

" If I have not forgotten how." He took her foot in his hand, and before she lowered her thick veil he

saw her turn scarlet. "You are no heavier," he said quietly; "the years have passed you by."

Then they rode on, out past the grey stone dragons by the gate, across the wide lawn—and still she rode as a woman in a dream.

"You came back, Oliver?" she questioned him. "Why?"

"To see some friends of mine—the Considine girls. I want them to be happy here, as they most foolishly came." There was no emotion on his face, save a quiet look of relief—that of a man who, having feared a hurt, finds he is without pain and whole.

"Most foolishly," she said; "they are the talk of the county."

She knew why: how she herself had spread each bitter story; and now, with some tangible ground, had flashed such cold glare of scandal that no one would speak to them. Looking ahead to where Moira was jogging, silent and alone, the unreasoning flood of dislike which she had felt before tore at Violet Vereker's heart.

"To make them happy?" she said coldly. "It would be better to send them back to where they came from. The girl in front has made herself conspicuous with a Captain Milton. They must go away."

"I think not," said the Hermit slowly. "You can do a great deal for them, Violet."

As he spoke her name the hope sprang to life again—sprang and trembled, dreading a second living death. She had possessed riches, beauty, a slavish husband, a docile son, yet was it all now worth it? She had thought so then. But now, with youth

behind, with age holding his iron door open in front, Mrs. Vereker doubted; knew that she had missed something which could never be hers again.

"You'll stay for the winter?" she asked.

"I may." His face clouded. "It depends—upon what happens. I cannot read the future just now."

"But—you can forget the past?" The scent of the huge bunch of violets which she wore drove to his nostrils as she bent across to him; her eyes shone under the thick meshes of her veil.

"I can—most happily," he answered steadfastly.

Mrs. Vereker drew a quick breath.

Was it fate that they should ride again to Tulla covert, seeing the dark patch of gorse far off on the green hillside; that they should jog down the lane where she had told him what she meant to do; and stand together where he loosed a storm of fiery words upon her, and she had laughed at him?

The Hermit drifted away a little. Hounds were in covert, but no whimper stirred the waiting crowd.

Moira, still riding alone, came up at the far side of the hedge, and stood still, letting the thin Star eat the grass. Donough Moroney stood at one corner of the gorse watching intently. He looked round as the Hermit came near.

"You rode a great hunt from here, didn't you?" he said. "I was a schoolboy, but I remember it. Right away to Rathallen. It's a thick gorse now." Then he stayed silent for a minute. "You're with the Considines?" he asked.

The Hermit said that he was.

"They're a wonderful family," said the Master

mournfully. "The little one has two hounds lamed for me. She *will* follow me," he added, with a sudden spasm of something which was not resentment. "There's one on a grey clothes-horse, and one on a motor-'bus; but the little one can shove you to rights off a bank—if you delay a minute."

The Hermit smiled at Kathleen, who was hovering near.

Meanwhile Moira, as The Star tore up juicy mouthfuls, sat silent and miserable; and Mrs. Vereker, on the other side of the hedge, was unaware of her presence.

She talked in her clear, cold voice to Mrs. Knox, who had been away for some time. Moira heard her own name.

"They are impossible, Nelly. You cannot be kind to them." With a suggestion worse than open accusation, Mrs. Vereker gave the history of the missed train. "Mere folly, of course, but one cannot tolerate folly . . . of that class. They are sworn allies too of those impossible Geoghans. Dennis, silly boy, was attracted by the fair one; they laid traps for him, but I put my foot down. He understands now that he is never to do anything but say good-morning. They can marry a Geoghan, as they came here in search of husbands."

Each word beat as a sledge-hammer on to Moira's bruised heart. All this, the fruit of her cherished scheme. This to greet the Hermit when he came to see its working.

"And Dennis will obey me," the cold voice went on slowly. "His fancy was merely a passing one. I must say I cannot understand how a man of

Mr. Grattan's class comes to be mixed up with them."

Youth knows its own bitterness, it gathers sorrow to it with the full belief that having come it will never leave again. Moira tasted this now; high hopes hurt as they fall from their giddy perches. Moira had brought the others here, had built her sand castles, woven her foolish webs, all on this trip. And for a time believed she had been right. Was there nothing, no one triumph or achievement which could be put forward? Hounds were speaking in covert, but it was a difficult place to get a fox away from, and the field knew they might have some time to wait.

Miss Clara Geoghan rode through the gap with Captain Milton. Her expression, as she spied Moira, changed to a lofty unfriendliness, and she bade good-morning with full memory of Cornelius's wrongs. On observing that Milton meant to remain with Moira, the smiles Miss Clara had turned upon him changed to obvious sneers.

"I wouldn't intrude," said Miss Clara spitefully. "Oh, dear no. Indeed, I wouldn't."

She tossed her loosely done hair, and looked frankly spiteful. "And you never asked for poor Cornelius," she said, evidently loth to leave, "that's in bed with his lungs, no less. Nicely your mousey sister treated him, indeed, and no fear he'll trouble her again, I can tell you."

"I trust not," said Moira sharply.

Milton was smoking a huge cigar; the long delay in covert prophesied a poor scent; he had been at peace with the world, but Miss Clara's first words

made him anxious. The story of the deer hunt had also reached his ears. Good fun and flirtation were one thing; entwining of names in other ways hinted at the seriousness of marriage, and he had no inclination towards this step.

But Moira's face in its sorrow was so pretty that he could not abandon his old form of light compliment.

"You're looking stunning," he said.

"Don't mind me," said Clara Geoghan viciously, and, smiting her patient horse, rode away.

Moira looked at Milton steadily. If he were really in love with her, meant to ask her to marry him, it would at least be something. Whatever her own feelings were—and she felt that she could not contemplate a whole life spent with Milton—the fact of an engagement would justify the trip.

So she smiled at him with such pitiful sweetness that Milton's expression deepened to something even more fatuous than its wont.

The distant notes of the pack, the hopes of a hunt, were drowned as she waited.

"Hang silly story some one's spread about us," was what Milton said. "I must get Grattan to say what really happened—how he fetched us, and so on."

The Hermit rode slowly round the hedge, and looked hard at them.

"I want you, Moira," he said. "I want you out here with me."

"The very genuine Sultan," said Milton crossly to himself.

"Moira, Moria. It has not been a success,"

said the Hermit unhappily. He had heard many things.

The sharp retorts of the Borrisdeane days were dead; a tear splashed down on The Star's ragged mane. Then Moira recovered herself.

"It may be," she said.

The Hermit looked at Milton and grunted. His muttered words were inaudible.

They rode together among the crowd. Heads that had been turned away in the morning were bent in greetings now. He took her along the hedge to where Mrs. Vereker was standing. The elder woman's eyes flashed in sudden anger on Moira's pretty downcast face.

"Well, Oliver," she said, ignoring his companion, "we may finish near Knock. You'll come in, of course?"

"I am with Miss Considine," he answered, and his eyes challenged hers to a response. "I've been here since I motored her home from stag-hunting a day or two ago. I had arranged to fetch her."

Mrs. Vereker coloured faintly, she knew what he meant; knew he had heard of her spreading this story and others.

"I hope"—she spoke stiffly—"that Miss Considine will also come in to tea."

"Thank you." The Hermit did the answering. "If there is any of the car left we'll send the roan to pick us up, Moira."

"And you." Mrs. Vereker rode with them as they went on. "When your brother dies—it can be only months, I hear—shall you hunt here, Oliver? You'll have so many homes then."

"The inheritance took long to come," he answered, looking at her. "You have eaten the twenty years of riches, which might have been those of comparative poverty, Violet."

"And found them bitter on the tongue," she answered. "I—I—am rich still, Oliver."

Moira wrenched The Star away. Why talk thus before her? But just as she turned, the fox broke out across the field beneath them, straight for Dirk Hills, six miles and more away.

"Come, Moira, to the right. Come with me."

He knew the way. The Star thundered by the brown horse, pulling wildly; Moira wondering when she would fall. Hounds were racing close on their fox; across flat fields, fenced with ragged, difficult banks. Flash, the grey mare cleared the first, the second she kicked back at. To every horse, however bad, comes one day when it will jump. This was The Star's. The impulse to refuse was not upon her. If she jumped nothing well, she got over safely to the far side, while better horses came to earth. On, still racing down the slope to the valley, with no check or hesitation, while the field tailed behind them, and they knew that they had got a flying start.

A huge log of timber barred a gap in front. The Hermit checked his horse as they faced it.

"Can she, Moira?" he asked.

"She can clear any height," gasped Moira, her cheeks pink, her eyes alight, for this was something to live for.

Over with a rap went the brown, over with a soaring plunge flew the grey. Hounds swung to them along the fence, so that they had to steady their

horses. The Master, closely followed by Kathleen, was riding on their right, a few others to the left. Pace had choked slow horses, a bad start had left many.

"It's going to be the old line, Noll"—Knox, on his striding black, shoved up beside them—"Dirk Hills over the top and away to Ballybushy. Don't try the rails and river to-day, my boy."

"To-day I want to live, for I have something to do," said the Hermit. "Steady her, Moira. It's narrow."

The Star flew the whole thing, and the Hermit, watching, groaned. They bent to the west now, along the swelling rise of the hills. Fences were smaller, the going lighter; luckily, for horses faltered in their stride, blown by the deep ground in the valley. They viewed their fox as they breasted the hill: he was crossing through a spur, going strongly still.

Horses sobbed as they toiled up, stumbling through heather and over stones, but the long descent gave them breath, and hounds worked more slowly over the rough ground.

The Star was tiring. She changed her stride, and blundered frequently. A fall was only a matter of time. As they galloped on they came near a wide ditch edged by strong railings, with a low-built wall beyond. Hounds dwelt for a moment where the tired fox had turned sharply.

"I jumped that," said the Hermit, pointing, "long ago."

"And got over?" Moira asked.

"No, we struck the rails this side, and I was

thrown against the wall, as I thought I should be. I wanted to kill myself. Instead, I was only badly hurt. I'll tell you all about it soon, Moira."

"I think I know," she answered quietly. "The old man, Dunne, told us the story. Oh, listen to them. Look!"

From scent to view now, with a suddenly blood-thirsty crash of music, every hound racing for blood. A last turn, a minute's gaining, the bared teeth, and the swift death of a gallant fox pulled down in the open.

Moira was not destined to finish the hunt, for as they crossed the road, running very fast, the tired Star caught her knees in the bank and turned over on to a heap of loose stones, cutting herself badly. Moira jumped up unhurt, and the Hermit, as he poured whisky and water upon the mare's wounds, said it would be a long job.

"And a good thing, too," he said cheerily. "For I'd never have seen you ride the brute again."

Two fields away they could hear the merry death cry of the hunt, and see the people as they crossed to their right, the jaded horses galloping stiffly, and jumping with effort. A distant clattering told them the more remote tail was coming along the road they stood on.

Cromartin, stopping, told them where the people were. Mrs. Vereker had fallen, and gone home; he had picked her up, and she had sent them a message to be sure to come in. Eva was miles behind, plodding hopelessly. Little Kathleen, they knew, was in front, and had probably got another brush.

"We'll go to Knock," said the Hermit. "Come, Moira. Thanks, Cromartin."

The Miss Geoghans had heard the invitation, their morning's haughtiness melted. Round-eyed, they had heard how Oliver Grattan would shortly be Lord Glendine, with a large income and several places.

Baby Julia reproached Clara hotly, and now rode up, beaming coyly.

The Hermit's *sotto voce* direction to snub that woman hard was not needed. Moira's sore heart had suffered too much to forgive.

"And you flying like a bird," babbled the Baby. "I declare we could see you a mile away. My, but that's the great mare, and I forgot this morning, but mamma hopes you'll all come to tea to-morrow, you and your friend," beamed Julia, wishing he was already a lord.

Moira regretted that they were engaged.

"Then I'll bring round your shapes in the morning," said Baby Julia, "and we'll have a chat."

Moira said she was sending Patsy for the shapes. Her manner was sufficiently remote to check further advances, and the Miss Geoghans fell back, fighting furiously.

"And the way you an' mamma cautioned me to beat them," wailed the Baby. "An' we as thick as thieves before. And one of them perhaps goin' to marry that lord that's to be."

The Hermit would have called it a new title; but as he was not there, Miss Clara only denounced "all snobs," and then said "she'd eat the face off mamma with her stories."

"You liked it, Moira?" The Hermit's face was very quiet, set in its saddest lines. He seemed to have been lost in thought.

"Liked it!" Moira held the limping Star tightly. "It was glorious. If one could hunt year after year, upon good horses."

"Soldiers' wives are so often in places where hunting is impossible," said the Hermit, looking hard at her.

"And they only keep ponies and traps when they are in a hunting country." Moira looked contemptuous. "But, oh! think of the eternity of Borrisdeane winters after this."

"And Borrisdeane summers; the big trout in the old lake; the sea thundering on the shore: they were not so bad, little Moira."

Voice failed her, for she knew now how good they had been. To hunt, one must have money. Enjoyment was half swept away by the cares which marred the world here—snubs, averted faces, over-friendly Geoghans. Worst of all, the Hermit, in a way—so often despised—turning up to set all things straight.

They arrived at Knock at the same moment as Mrs. Vereker and the roan horse. That lady, in fact, was being driven on their car, having broken her stirrup-leather, and the roan had treated her to a variety of stops and bolts, which were very trying to the nerves.

She turned to welcome the Hermit, her cold face very handsome, her eyes still alight.

"I am glad you came, Oliver," she said, with a strange gentleness.

"And I am glad you asked us, Violet."

The flashing look beneath Mrs. Vereker's eyelashes was half question, half wonder.

"Come!" she said quietly.

They followed her through the splendidly furnished, but chill, unhomelike hall, and down the long corridor, where the statues gleamed white in the dusk. Their voices seemed to tone to the stillness of it, to die to an echoing hum even as they spoke of their hunt.

They were the first to come in. Mrs. Vereker led them into the drawing-room, with its glimmer of white shaded lights and dimness of many shadows, and treasures of silver and marble where the lights fell.

"Do you like my house, Oliver?" She turned to him with a certain pride, standing with her hand on an exquisite copy of Apollo.

"It is a wonderful house, Violet. You have gathered treasures into it," he answered.

Moira, standing by the fire, felt her heart contract. The Hermit would be master of these treasures; husband to the cold, treacherous love he was about to forgive.

"It is a big house—and lonely," she said thoughtfully. There was no mistaking the note of appeal in her voice, the look in her eyes.

"You could make it less lonely," he said, almost carelessly.

Footmen brought in tea. A stately meal, handed ceremoniously, with glimmer of gold plate and fragile white china, and dishes of expensive sandwiches and cakes; and nothing Moira thought half as good as Biddy's hot griddle-cakes, which one must eat

carefully, because of their too lavish allowance of butter.

Dennis came in then, bringing a train of splashed, red-coated men, whose cheery voices sank and whose faces lengthened as they partook of half-cold tea and rich cake. Some openly preferred the solider comforts of the dining-room, and went softly across the thick carpet, making their way through the patch-work of light and shadows to the heavy curtains guarding the dining-room door.

Moira, chilled and hungry, tired by the inevitable reaction of the run, sat quietly in her corner unnoticed, yet with keen ears straining for every word.

Old Knox, seeing her, came across.

"In the dark, Miss Moira," he said, and even his voice sank to a half-whisper. "And in the cold," he added, wheeling her satin-covered chair nearer to the dull fire, before he sat beside her. "A great surprise for us all to-day"; he nodded towards the Hermit. "Young Noll, after all these years. He can show us how to go as he could then, and I suppose"—the old man's voice saddened a little—"that he has come back to settle here."

Moira made no answer. It was hard that chilled tea, swallowed two minutes before, should seem to choke her.

"And yet," General Knox shook his head. "Oh, of course, it's all as it should be—but she treated him villainously. If it had been done to me, Miss Moira, I could not forgive—even after a score of years."

Moira looked up at the Hermit's quiet face—a strong face, despite its gentleness; it was strange to her that he could. "A dead friend," he had said, yet

he stood beside that friend, and she was alive and rich and very handsome.

"Of course this place is hers for life." Old Knox talked on, not noticing the girl's silence. "Hers, with a tremendous jointure, to do as she likes with. And the title may carry no money; I don't know."

"Shall I take your cup, Moira?" The Hermit had seen the tired, white little face, and came over. "We had better go back."

"I shall be at home to-morrow, Oliver." Mrs. Vereker followed him. "A few people whom you would like to meet. Will you come?"

As before, he looked at Moira, and Mrs. Vereker understood. With some show of cordiality she asked the Considines also.

A flicker of red blood warmed her pale cheeks; her eyes still shone.

Moira accepted quietly. It was at least something that the ban passed by the county should be lifted off them. "They would be glad to come."

"Thank you, Vi—thank you. This——as I never thought it would be." The Hermit's hand closed upon his old love's with a warmth which made Moira sniff contemptuously.

They drove home through a golden twilight, with faint shadows of grey and purple, and the distant hills bathed in a sea of pallid gold. The roan horse sped swiftly, too anxious for oats to stop. As they lurched up and down the steep bridge crossing the Dare, the Hermit broke the silence which had held them.

"I would like to tell you, Moira," he began, "of an old——"

"James Dunne told me when first we came," said Moira shortly.

"James Dunne," said the Hermit blankly.

"Told me about you—and Mrs. Vereker, though then I did not know that it was you. Now I remember the photograph you showed me at Borrisdeane. It's all very romantic," said Moira, with a complete lack of appreciation for romance in her manner.

"It was—very romantic once," he answered, looking at her thoughtfully. "Well, that story needs no telling. There was another—a newer one—which, since I've come down, I think I had better keep to myself for a time."

And Moira thought she knew that also.

"A dream—and perhaps a bitter awakening, Moira" —his voice grew insistent. "Can't you say you are glad I came down—to help you?"

"It makes absolutely no difference to me," said Moira tonelessly.

CHAPTER XVII

HOW THE TRIP SUCCEEDED

PATSY came to meet them cheerfully. He said "The Star's pastern jint was hangin' on by a bit of skhin, an' he feared she'd niver walk agin. Miss Eva," he added, "had come back two hours ago, bein' left two miles behind the lasht man of all, an' gettin' tired of it. An' indeed Gog's legs were already swhellin' up finely."

Having nothing further pleasant to tell them, Patsy retired to his stables, whistling a Kerry dirge.

But there was cheer in the house. Biddy had built up a mighty fire. James Dunne had purchased turf and bog wood from some distant friend, and the old woman was happy.

"The smhell of thim would hearten you," he said, as they came in. "If ye'd shut yer eyes ye might be back at Borrisdeane.

Moira ran to change, and returned to find the Hermit welcoming a second tea, and talking earnestly to Biddy.

This tea was hot, and the thickly buttered griddle-bread light as a feather; but to Moira both were chill and tasteless; her world was hollow; the bitterness of complete failure was cold upon her. If one thing, just one good thing, would come of the trip

she had organised! Crouching close to the fire, with its faintly pungent fragrance, she lashed hope to a faint life. Now that Mrs. Vereker was once more friendly, Eva and Dennis might come together again. Her sister might yet reign at Knock.

The transparency of her nature forced the wish to utterance; she put it forward almost roughly.

"As one outcome for all you have spent?" The Hermit saw plainly what Moira meant. "But he is a weak creature, Moira, who gives a girl up at his mother's bidding. Also, he is a mere boy, younger than Eva; and unless I am and have been blind, I doubt if your sister would say 'yes.'"

Moira hung her head sulkily.

"Eva could not say—say 'no,'" she answered. "It would mean too much."

Then Eva, radiant, pink-cheeked, a thick letter in her hand, burst in upon them. It was evident that some great joy had befallen her.

"Moira!" she cried.

"Eva! Has anybody bought Gog?" said Moira.

"Bought Gog! The poor old cart-horse." Eva sat down and got up again, restlessly.

"Has——?" Wild thoughts raced through Moira's brain. "Eva, we are all asked to Knock to-morrow."

"I shall not go." Eva spoke with determination. "Dennis Vereker was rude to me to-day. Yet perhaps I may. Oh, Moira—Hermit; it's—it's—Derek!

The Hermit remarked without surprise that he thought it would be Derek—some day.

"It's Derek. He's coming back at once to shoot at Borrisdeane. He wants me there. He did not write, because he had promised his father there should

be no engagement for a year He half told me. And now his father's dead, and he has money, and it's all too splendid." Eva rhapsodised heartlessly, singing the late Mr. Carstairs' requiem with complete joy.

It was at least evident that no regret for Castle Knock occupied her thoughts.

"So, as far as that was concerned," said Moira, when she had kissed her sister, "we need not have come to Ballydare."

Eva, too happy to do anything except think, had drifted off again.

"It would seem so." The Hermit leant against the mantelshelf, looking down at Moira's brown hair, which the twilight turned to red gold. "And—for you—Moira?"

"For me?" She laughed shortly, and answered a little unsteadily. "For me Ballydare does not seem to have worked wonders. But at least it is over. Any money we have left must go to buy Eva's trousseau. I shall go back and live at Lake Cottage. And you—I suppose you will never come to Borrisdeane now."

The wide lake, the beating sea, the ripple of wind across the coarse grasses of the bog seemed to rise before her. She could see them all, and feel with the vision a cold and lonely wind rushing across the land. No hunting; no horses; no Hermit to wrangle with daily.

"I—that would depend." He stared hard at her, and looked as a man who wants to ask a question, when Kathleen came bursting in.

"A hunt—oh, such a hunt. Jim Crow had never faltered, never made a mistake, and she had not even

jumped on a hound. Mr. Moroney said at the finish, it was because—they were too far in front of me," said Kathleen, with sudden thoughtfulness.

They dined well off Biddy's cookery, with the new maid, whom Patsy would not even speak to, waiting with a cheery and noisy inefficiency. Even the homely aroma of a goose, roasted before the fire, and stuffed with a haunting mixture of onions and potatoes, could not dispel a soberness which clung to them. Moira had a latent cold, and sniffed occasionally. Eva was wrapped in the radiant silence which looks at food, and wonders how people can wish to eat; and little Kathleen seemed immersed in the solving of some problem of her own, at which she wrinkled her white forehead and bit at her lip, and nodded to herself as if summing up and giving judgment.

An absent-minded game of bridge in the evening was marked by Eva inquiring if she might play to Dereks, and wondering, round-eyed, why they laughed, and by Kathleen, as she fingered her cards, replying, "After you, please."

The Hermit, as he bade them good-night, said he would call for them at three.

Stillness fell on the little house, but not peace, for one girl lay wide-eyed, too happy to sleep, and one, with her head deep in her pillow, hoped Biddy would not notice its salt dampness in the morning.

The Daracq, speedily mended, came gliding to fetch them—Eva and Moira—for Kathleen said she had business, and could not go.

The Hermit looked with interest at the plumed hats with plumes faintly uncurled; at the trailing gowns

which hailed from Ballydare; but he said nothing, for Moira's face, robbed of its colour and radiance, was strangely pretty in its pallor and sadness.

The Hermit had heard many things that morning from old friends at Ballydare: hints of the Considines' foolish wildness; of how they had offended people there; further hints of the attachment between Milton and Moira; how he had conspicuously paid the girl attention for some time, and how, following the expedition to the staghounds, no doubt the engagement would be published immediately.

When the Hermit observed that he himself had fetched Miss Considine home, he was met by the polite "How-nice-of-you-to-say-it-old-chap" look, which cannot be met by hot words, as it is a silent expression of thought. He was therefore in a gloomy temper as he wheeled in at the gate of The Beeches; distinctly snappy to Patsy when he tendered information concerning the ills of the horses, and inclined to pass at reckless speed among the donkey and coal carts in the town.

It was a grey day, chill and gloomy: dark masses of clouds on the horizon, whisper of coming rain in the sobbing wind, the bare branches all moving restlessly.

They crouched under the fur rugs as the motor sped along the narrow roads, and Moira, whose hands were icy from holding on her big hat, and whose heart was heavy and sad, never spoke.

Past the grim, grey lions, pawing endlessly at unseen foes, through the regularity of the flower garden, where four white figures kept guard. The doors of Knock Castle swung to receive them to-day; the butler had no gloomy forebodings of a scolding

as he preceded them into the warm silence of the long corridor. Little groups of people were collected about, idling in the hall, playing cards, or looking vaguely for a disc which should give them a prize if they found it.

Clouds had been grey outside, and the shadows fell deeply in the half-lighted drawing-room. White shapes showed ghostly and dim, with rounded limbs showing sharply where the rays from a lamp touched them.

There were only two or three people in the drawing-room. Mrs. Vereker turned quickly as she heard the butler murmur "The Miss Considines," confidentially.

The radiance of yesterday, the new hope's faint life nursed through a sleepless night was with her—was alive in faintly glowing cheeks and softened eyes. The years that were past seemed to wither up as a scroll as she came to meet them ; the softness of old lace, the bloom of velvet, the shimmer of diamonds helping to fling age from her.

No thread of silver in the dark hair ; scarcely a line on the cold, handsome face. As Moira shook hands, she felt suddenly the tawdriness of her plumes and trailing, ill-made skirt, her own insignificance before this splendid woman.

"You are late. They are playing bridge, or looking for a hidden treasure." There was a roundness in the voice which Moira had never heard before.

Eva went away with Cromartin. Moira slipped into the lurking shadow near the window and stood alone, fingering a huge cineraria—a thing scentless and stiff, a mass of tiny mauve flowers.

"We do not want to play, Oliver; we can talk."

"Of many things," he said quietly.

"Of life—and loneliness." She moved full into the lights, daring their radiance. "Oliver, I ask you again, Have you forgiven?"

"Completely," he said tranquilly; yet he turned almost sadly from the light which leapt to his old love's dark eyes, and looked about the room.

"You said, too, you liked my house. I think I have made it good to look at. But it's big, Oliver. Dennis will marry and go to Craglaughan, and I shall be here."

"Among your statues," he answered; but his voice was not happy.

"They have been friends to me." The woman's voice shook. "If I sinned—perhaps—I suffered." Her eyes looked quickly at the picture of an old man—white-bearded, bald-headed, with a wrinkled, kindly face. She watched the Hermit then, almost moodily.

"Yet you have had all you wanted, Vi. And I—I had hoped, before I came here, to have what I want." The note of love, which is always youth, sounded in Oliver Grattan's voice.

"I wish, Violet, for old sake's sake, that you had been kinder to my friends."

Her glance followed his to a figure in the shadows by a distant window, to a young face which came suddenly into an arc of light.

Moira could bear no more. She slipped through a curtained doorway and found herself in a conservatory. Electric lights gleamed softly from globes fashioned like flowers; there was wealth of colour

and the soft scent of plant life. Cyclamens flung up quaint, gay hoods; friesias, all-powered waxiness; and long-stemmed narcissi, yellow and white. Moira passed among them to a cushioned seat.

A wave of hopeless bitterness swept over Moira. These things of sweetness and colour were for ever outside her life. If one thing—but one—could happen to justify the trip!

The curtains at the far end parted, and Milton came in.

"Looking for a place to smoke," he explained. "What luck to find you!"

She looked at him in dreary questioning. If he asked her, she thought—as she had thought yesterday—it would be something.

"And, by Jove, how shining you look!" He sat down by her, fatuously contented.

Perhaps this was how men proposed. Moira waited, the same look of dreary questioning on her face.

"A little hipped, but ripping." His fingers sought hers. "I tell you, we've had a good time here."

"I am going away," said Moira quietly, resisting the impulse to pull her hand away.

Oh she was pretty—very pretty. Milton thought of the stories afloat; but the wan little face near him moved him to foolishness, and to attempt at making things clear.

"But we'll meet again. Silly asses have been talking, Miss Moira. Just jealousy of your prettiness, and you all being such good sorts. No straight-laced, starchy nonsense. Tell you . . . you shall run over to town, bring a sister, or any one, and I'll give you a good time: theatres, lunches, or, if the times

are good, stand a frock to enjoy them in. On the Q.T., because, you see—my people live there." His fingers closed on hers; the magic of her wide eyes made his tongue run faster. "If things were different, Moira, we might fix everything up, for I'm really gone on you—but one's people are so silly. They wouldn't understand you're only jolly and good sorts. They are so particular about a fellow's future—and then money."

Moira understood at last. This man—this veritable last straw to her burden of false hopes, was telling her—Moira Considine, that if she were another class of girl he would almost honour her by asking her to marry him. She grew scarlet and then pale, and he was too dense to take warning. His fingers pressed hers. A kiss would be no harm.

"You dare!" She flashed and started up, sending some flower-pots crashing down.

He stared at the angry girl.

The curtains parted, and the Hermit came in.

"Moira. It is tea time. Ah!"—the Hermit paused. Then, "Anything the matter?" he said.

"Oh—nothing that I do not deserve. Moira was never reticent. "Merely"—she flung out an accusing hand—"that this—gentleman—has just told me he would have liked to ask me to marry him if I had been a girl whom his people could have received."

"Oh!" There was no surprise in the Hermit's voice; but the light in his eyes was one of swiftly moving expression. "Oh! It seems a pity that you did not explain to him, Moira, before he spoke, that you were engaged to me."

Moira's face changed. As the wave of hopeless

bitterness had swept over her, a second wave of comfort dashed the spume of the cold waters on. She could have laid her head on the Hermit's shoulder and wept. For the cup of her misery had been full, and now she seemed to move from outer darkness into the warmth and shelter of a lighted room.

"Yes, it would have been better if I had," she said proudly, looking at Milton.

Milton, who had been merely acting according to his lights, muttered foolishly; too amazed to proffer explanation, and went away, his humour a black one. The future Lady Glendine was quite another person from little foolish Moira Considine.

"Oh, hang it," said Lancelot Milton, as the curtains closed upon him, and he passed into outer light.

"But . . . why?" asked Moira, her eyes wet.

"It seemed for the moment to meet the case. To punish the fellow," said the Hermit. "Moira, you've been foolish, and this man——"

At this point Moira poured out her opinion of Milton with unmeasured wrath. "And yet"—she destroyed several friesias thoughtlessly—"and yet—I would have accepted him if he had asked me. . . . Just to justify my coming here, to show we had done something by leaving Borrisdeane. . . . And after all"—the wan look settled on her face again—"he will know soon that it is not true—see that you only said it to help me. Perhaps I shall be gone away first. Back——"

"Back to Lake Cottage?" he asked.

"To live there all my life," she said.

"Need he know? Need you either?" said the Hermit quietly.

She stared until the glowing flowers massed and waved, and seemed to twist about her.

"Moira. Do you remember what I said to you going out to Slattery's? How a man may live to be glad of the sorrow he has suffered? I thought you cared for this—Milton." The Hermit thoughtlessly kicked a worm which wriggled from one of the broken pots.

"But you—you've come down here to marry." Moira pointed to the drawing-room.

"Perhaps I have. The lake will be blue in the spring time, soon, Moira. The Danogue will be full of trout, the old sea all a-thunder on the beach. If you could put up with that for half a year—for I love my home there—and hunt in winter, and, incidentally put up with me also, why not let things stand? Could you, little Moira?"

The soft colours melted, and merged into a strange wheel of light as Moira listened. Could she? Having realised for a week how she cared. Knowing now that happiness had suddenly wrapped his sunlit cloak about her, and that the Hermit was the sun of that happiness.

And then, dimly, she realised that the Hermit was still talking. Something now about a man's sore heart and a wilful child, and if she could care——

Then he stopped, for Moira's face answered him.

"And oh, it was just because I cared that I fought with you," said Moira, as she recovered her voice. "Just like The Star and the curb, which she went best in afterwards."

The Hermit, drily, said it was an excellent simile.

His hand upon her arm, they went back to the

drawing-room, empty still, save for the hostess, who stood near the fire. She turned and started as she saw them.

"So, it is that?" she said dully. For his face spoke.

"I hope so, Violet."

It was Mrs. Vereker who moved into the shadows now—close to a marble Clodion. The hope she had cherished all night bit deep at her heart, and in that anguish died. For the future she knew she would move alone in her quiet house, among her still white companions, with one live thing, regret, ever beside her. Then something made her come forward and take Moira's face in her hand, turning the girl's face up gently.

"You are very pretty, child," she said. "Make up to him for what I took away."

No one had ever seen the cold woman cry; yet what she wiped from her cheeks was salt and strong.

In that moment Violet Vereker knew the bitterness she had dealt to the man at her side twenty-two years before. She had laughed then; she did not laugh now, as, for the second time, she saw they must part.

"Thank you, Violet," said the Hermit simply. "In that we make a true peace."

The rest of the evening was a blur to Moira. She went through it vaguely, sometimes seeing Eva, sometimes Dennis, who hovered near her, his face full of boyish sorrow.

They flashed home, and there were plans to be discussed, for Eva wanted to go back. Moira, smiling, explained that on her part she did not want to seek more fortune, as she was going to marry the Hermit.

But the Hermit said that as he had waited so long for a wife he thought he would like one at once, and suggested an immediate marriage, and finishing the season here in another house, "and with little Kathleen with us," he said.

Kathleen looked up thoughtfully. She said, after a pause, that they need not bother about her, for she had been asked to stay at Carrickdown.

Unmoved by a burst of sisterly wrath and quick reminders that Donough Moroney had no sister, Kathleen stroked her chin, and then, as the flow of words subsided, remarked that she was nineteen.

The Hermit said severely that he did not know what young Moroney could have been thinking of.

"He said I wouldn't kill so many hounds if I always rode his horses," observed Kathleen meekly.

"Do you mean he wants to marry you?" burst out Moira.

"He said it's the only way he could manage it," said Kathleen placidly.

A sudden light dawned in Moira's eyes. They flashed triumph upon the Hermit.

"Then it has been a success after all," she cried.

"Oh, I perceive," he said sadly, "that I shall never be able to criticise the wisdom of your idea." But he smiled contentedly.

THE END

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